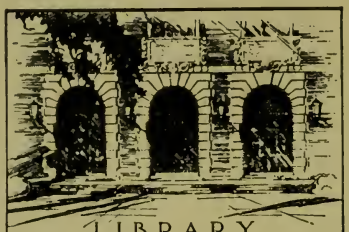
"MY LOVE!"

E. LYNN LINTON



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CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY, W.

"MY LOVE!"

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BY

E. LYNN LINTON

AUTHOR OF "PATRICIA KEMBALL," "THE ATONEMENT OF LEAM DUNDAS," "UNDER WHICH LORD?" "THE REBEL OF THE FAMILY," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London

CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1881

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"MY LOVE!"

CHAPTER I.

ROCKS AHEAD.

THE morning after the picnic Randolph Mackenzie was mooning about the garden at Derwent Lodge, by no means in a joyous frame of mind. Something about that noisy rollicking yesterday had left a bitter taste in his mouth; and he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment and dissatisfaction for which he could find neither a name nor the cause.

For one thing indeed, he was sorry that his little cousin had not gone with them. That little cousin of his was wonderfully good, and he cordially acknowledged how superior she was to the ordinary run of girls. Compare her with any of those at the picnic yesterday—why, she stood a head and shoulders above them all in

moral measurement! She was almost too good indeed; and Randolph caught himself out in the vileness of wishing that she was just a trifle less superior—that she could sometimes come down from her pure altitudes and condescend to the natural weaknesses of an every-day, but all the same an amiable, humanity—so much weakness for instance, as should include her father and mother, his good uncle and aunt. Her evident moral superiority over them, when they came home last night, had undeniably rubbed him the wrong way. He had felt it at the time and he felt it now just as keenly as then. He did not mind for himself. Hortensia was right to feel that she was a bright and shining light where he was not as much as a candlestick. But he did not like to see her so conscious of having taken higher rank in the hierarchy of virtue than that to which her good parents had attained. It savoured too much of spiritual pride for his taste; he being one who would have prayed with the publican rather than have justified himself with the Pharisee. And it seemed to him that what uncle William and aunt Cara thought innocent, Hortensia might accept as allowable. And on the whole—though it was very sweet of her to sacrifice her natural inclination for pleasure to friendship and Stella

Branscombe—still, it would have been more graceful and more dutiful had she given way to her parents and done as they wished.

Then there was that beautiful Stella herself; she too, was a difficult bit to rightly adjust in his moral mosaic. He had received this morning a letter from Cyril which had stirred up in his heart the natural sympathy of youth for youth, of man for man, and had filled him with pity for his friend, indignation against fate and doubt and perplexity all round. Sending all sorts of fervid, half-mad messages to his Love —for all that they daily exchanged long letters full of hope or fear, of love or assurance, as they were shaken by each passing mood—like that catching of the straw by the drowning man, poor Cyril seemed to have some kind of vague hope that the presence in Highwood of his friend, his chum, his faithful Pylades, would work a miracle in his favour. It was a link, at all events, if a slender one; and the poor fellow was in that state of despairing trouble when even the weakest tie is better than none at all. But it laid a heavy weight on Randolph's heart; for the good, honest, stupid fellow well knew that he could do nothing. Stella, like Hortensia, had sublime reasons and far-reaching arguments for doing as it seemed

to him less humanely than magnificently; and he could neither understand the one nor refute the other. The very difficulty which was annoying him at this moment in the adjustment of his moral mosaic was just the true answer to this question:—Was Stella right to postpone her marriage in this indefinite way, and to give Cyril so much pain and disappointment simply that she might stay and keep house for her father, and copy out his manuscript poetry and music? She was noble, pure, high-minded—all that and more; but, like Hortensia, might she not carry her virtue a trifle too far, and by becoming too angelic cease to be sufficiently human? "Excelsior" is a brave motto; but one might do better for one's self and for others than to be found by dogs frozen to death in a snow-drift!

It was a hard moral problem, and one that he could not solve, try as he would. It was a kind of cleft-stick in which he found himself—a spiritual "pons asinorum," where virtues were the angles and motives the straight lines—a true ethical dilemma, with friendship on the one horn and principle on the other—and he was in the blundering perplexity characteristic of men with small reasoning powers, wholesome instincts and strong affections, when those

whom they love go over their heads in morality and do as it seems to them wrong from the basis of an over lofty right.

He stood by the netting of the tennis-ground, apparently studying the size of the meshes and trying the strength of the stays, while in reality fretting himself into a mental fever because two pretty girls were so distractingly good and overwhelmingly high-minded. Presently Hortensia came out to join him. In the programme of her duties as it was to steady her cousin's fluid inclinations and induce him to take Orders, she was ever on the watch for favourable moments; and here was one eminently favourable. To make this stalwart, natural pioneer of practical civilization into a meek country curate, absorbed in old women and young ladies—in the just distribution of flannel petticoats and the nice observance of ecclesiastical drill—seemed to her a work of spiritual charity worthy of all effort, and where success would be its own reward. As for such a thing as natural fitness for the work of the sinful world, or natural unfitness for the sublimer reaches of spiritual life, Hortensia was far too zealous to allow the force of this kind of chilly, soul-destroying reasoning. "You ought," with her, was the serpent which swallowed up all

those weak, protesting little snakes of "cannot," and "would rather not;" and specially did she despise her cousin's little snake of natural disinclination—as indeed, to tell the truth, in her own heart she despised all that was characteristic of him throughout.

When therefore, she saw him standing idly by the netting studying the meshes of that frivolous bit of reticulation, the pretty Puritan laid aside her morning task of making rough little shirts for the Mother's Bag, and turned to her more congenial employment of exhorting and proselytizing.

But Randolph would not give her missionary efforts a chance to-day. He was too much absorbed in the affairs of others to have any interest in himself. Cyril and Stella, and Hortensia herself, were far before his own future profession; but as he was not quite up to the work of attacking his little cousin offhand, he fell back on Stella, and through her on Cyril.

"How was Stella Branscombe yesterday?" he asked quickly, eagerly, so soon as her cousin joined him.

Good manners obliged her to answer him.

"Stella? she was quite well," she said a little pettishly; though had the girl been ill

Hortensia would not have seen it, swept away as she had been in the frothy flood of Mr. Branscombe's sonorous nonsense. And, indeed, for the matter of that Stella was not well; and day by day got steadily lower in tone and more depressed in mind.

"Was she in good spirits?" he asked again.

"Randolph! how could she be in good spirits when her mother has been dead only so short a time!" was Hortensia's grave rebuke.

"No; of course not; not really jolly; but there are degrees, you know," said Randolph, sensibly if clumsily. "Did she speak of Cyril? Did she seem to regret him in any way?" he then asked in the same headlong way as before, unconsciously blocking up the avenue against his cousin's proselytizing intentions.

"Certainly not," said Hortensia, pinching her lips. "She is too much devoted to her father to think of any one else."

"Her love for her father has nothing to do with her love for Cyril," said Randolph. "Surely it is a girl's duty to love the fellow to whom she is engaged!"

"But she owes her first duty to her father," said Hortensia. "And such a father!" she added with enthusiasm. "Stella is blessed and honoured in giving her life to such a man as

that! She will never have such glorious happiness as she has now!"

"Oh, I say, come now!" ejaculated Randolph. His cousin's ardour disconcerted him. "You go too far, Hortensia. Mr. Branscombe is not all that by a long way! I confess he is much too fine for me. I cannot digest such a lot of cream and sugar. It is all too hot-pressed and superfine all round," he added, with a generous confusion of similes.

"It pains me to see you incapable of appreciating such a pure and delicate genius as Mr. Branscombe's!" said Hortensia with severity.

"At least I appreciate you and Stella Branscombe," was the answer made with affectionate gallantry.

But the prim little face did not relax. If she had to convince Randolph of his present state of moral blindness and spiritual abasement, and convert him to higher things, Hortensia felt that she must not humour his weakness nor submit to his follies. And compliments are follies—unless rendered sublime utterances by such poetic genius as that possessed by Mr. Branscombe.

"Stella is very good in her way," she answered gravely; "as for me, of course, I am nothing!—but though Stella is very nice and

dear, she is not equal to her father. She is of silver if you like, but Mr. Branscombe is gold, pure gold!"

She raised her eyes as she said this, and looked up into the sky as if worshipping the clouds overhead.

Frederick Branscombe, handsome, old, showy, well-preserved, full of frothy sentiment and of superficial talent, talking rubbish in hazy language and a stage voice, uttering platitudes as if they were divine truths newly revealed, exacting homage for his own part but paying back to his young devotee almost as much as he exacted—Frederick Branscombe, whose poetry and art had killed his wife and threatened to do the same by his daughter—was the present god of Hortensia Lyon's devotion, the hero of her waking dreams and the idol of her imagination.

She was not what is meant by being in love with him; but she loved him. She never thought of him as a man by whose side she might one day stand in the equality of mutual love. He was only her ideal realized—the God-like poet at whose feet she knelt and whose favour was her highest honour. Had she been older things would have been different; but with such a girl as she was, her passionate enthusiasm was without the consciousness of

self or the foreshadowing of danger. So far indeed from carrying with it any sentiment of peril, it seemed to her the pre-eminent glory of her life; and the proudest confession of her own worthiness was in the knowledge that she could understand and fitly reverence such surpassing worth as Mr. Branscombe's. In short she was in the romantic and devotional stage of her mental existence when she must have her fetish. She might have gone in for Ritualism or Methodism—she might have devoted herself to painting ivy-leaves and apple-blossoms, or to the interpretation of Wagner and the violin—she might have written a novel, a tragedy, or Sonnets to Despair, to the Moon, to Death and to Disappointment—she might have given her heart to her cousin Randolph Mackenzie as the apotheosis of the commonplace, or have dreamed out a hero for herself after the pattern of Byron's Corsair or Trelawney's Younger Son—she might have studied anatomy by the plates in her father's Encyclopedia—have made her favourite saint of Victoria Woodhull and her heroine of Vera Sassulitch—but she did none of these things. She simply put Stella's father, that elegant and superb Mr. Branscombe, on a pedestal in the sanctuary of her imagination and gave herself

up to his worship as the highest to which she could attain.

Her cousin followed her eyes as they looked up into the sky, their gaze so full of enthusiastic devotion.

"No, Hortensia, he is not all that," he said again with sturdy honesty. "And between the two which is best—Mr. Branscombe, who has forced his daughter to make such a tremendous sacrifice, just to keep him company, or Stella, who had given up her lover for her father? You cannot make two words as to which is the most noble and unselfish! My only doubt is that Stella has gone over the line and done more than she need, or even ought."

"I do not compare them," answered Hortensia coldly. "Mr. Branscombe has only demanded what is due to him as a father; and Stella has only done her duty as a daughter."

"And Cyril Ponsonby?" asked the fidus Achates reproachfully. "It seems to me that Cyril comes badly off among you all! No one thinks of him; and yet he has Stella's promise, and the engagement was sanctioned by both the father and mother before poor Mrs. Branscombe died."

"That makes all the difference," said Hortensia in her turn reproachfully. "Would you

have such a man as Mr. Branscombe left quite alone, with no one to look after his comforts, no one to be his companion, no one to love him, or care for him? Randolph! I am shocked! If one has to suffer, of course it ought to be Cyril. In the first place he is younger, and can bear it better; and in the next place he is not half so splendid as Mr. Branscombe, and it does not signify whether he is happy or not. Certainly Stella should have given up Cyril for her father! She has done only her plain duty."

"I do not think so," said Randolph. "I think that having given her promise, she ought to have stuck to Cyril."

"I shall not talk to you any more," said Hortensia with dignity. "You are hopeless!"

She turned away with an offended air. Had he not scoffed at her god?—extinguished the fragrant incense burning before his shrine?—swept off the flowers with which she had garlanded the sacred image? He was then rightly ostracized and excommunicated, at least for the moment; as a faithful worshipper she would hold no friendly terms with him till her wrath had cooled.

"Now you are angry with me, Hortensia!" said her cousin, following at her heels and speaking with humility and sorrow, but not

with the true penitence of one who acknowledges his wrong and goes back on his words.

"No, I am not angry, I am only hurt and disappointed," she answered stiffly. "I had hoped better things of you, Randolph."

"Better things than what?" he asked boyishly. "What have I said or done that is so bad as all that? I only take Cyril's part; which is but natural when you come to think of it."

"That does not make it right," said Hortensia. "To be natural is not always to be noble."

"I am sorry to have vexed you," he returned; "but I am Cyril's friend, as you know; and if I do not stick to him, who ought?"

"You should prefer the truth even to friendship," was her lofty reply.

"I don't see any falsehood in what I have said," he answered hastily.

He was only a dense, good-hearted athlete, and not well up in moral philosophy of a refined kind.

She raised her small round shoulders with an impatient gesture.

"I did not say you told stories," she said contemptuously. "Truth does not mean only that. How can you be so *borné*, Randolph?"

"Oh, now you are going too far ahead of me," he said with frank bewilderment. "I do not follow you, Hortensia."

"I do not suppose you do," she answered, her foot on the door-step. "Mr. Branscombe would have understood me," she added, flinging her Parthian shaft as she took her way to her own room upstairs, where Randolph could not follow her.

So the bitter taste in his mouth was more bitter still, and the uneasiness that oppressed him was made still more onerous by this jarring conversation where every note had been discordant, and where his cousin's curious depreciation of himself had been in exact ratio with her exaggerated admiration of Mr. Branscombe. It was all very odd and very hard, he thought with a heavy sigh. Everything seemed to have got out of gear somehow, and he did not see how matters were to be put right—in chief part because he did not understand the secret springs by which they had gone wrong.

And what could he do for Cyril? The poor old fellow seemed to rely on him so much, and he had no more power than a cat to change the cross-current of events. He could not even see Stella, for he had no excuse to give for a second

call so soon after the first; and since her mother's death she had never been outside the Lodge gates, save when she and her father went in the close carriage to return the formal visits of condolence and to church. And they did not even go to church every Sunday; and when they did they went in long before the service began, and stayed until every one had left, and the old sexton was beginning to lock up. So how could he see her? And yet how much he should like to talk to her of Cyril and to do what he could to press the poor old fellow's claims. If only he could find an excuse for calling at Rose Hill!—if only he had a woman's fertile brain so that he could invent something out of nothing and give reasons where none existed!

And thinking all this, his desire grew too strong for fear or prudence; and he resolved to brave all the consequences, to break the ice of wisdom and propriety, and to call boldly at the house.

"What can that young man want?" asked Mr. Branscombe with marked displeasure when the servant brought in the news that Mr. Randolph Mackenzie was in the drawing-room. "I do not approve of these frequent visits from young men. In your position, my Stella, de-

prived of maternal care and guidance as you are, you cannot be too careful."

"He did not ask specially for me, dear papa," said Stella. "Most likely he asked for you."

But her heart beat fast, and she felt so far untrue in that she was very sure that Randolph had come to see her, because he was Cyril's friend and she was Cyril's lover.

"Oh! I have no time to bestow on a brainless young oaf like that," said Mr. Branscombe with impatient contempt. "If he has to be admitted at all you must do the honours. It is impossible for me to bring myself to his low level! Tell him I am engaged. It would be better indeed to tell him that we are both engaged and cannot receive him."

"Perhaps I had better see him for just a moment," said Stella, who had risen and made a few steps away from the table.

Her face was pale and eager. She pushed back her hair from her forehead—her poor mother's frequent gesture—and looked almost hysterically anxious and excited.

"He may have brought a message from Hortensia," she then added with unconscious and instinctive hypocrisy. It was the first thing that came into her mind, and she did ont wait to ask herself whether she really

believed her own suggestion or not—nor why she had put forward the pretty little Puritan as the most likely solvent of her father's will.

"Ah? So? In that case then go," said Mr. Branscombe graciously; "but do not be long, my child. Your time is too precious to be spent on such as Mr. Randolph Mackenzie," with a slight sneer—"employed too profitably here in this little Temple of Sweetness and Light to be dissipated in the nothings of his crass conversation!"

"I will be back directly, papa," said Stella; and her father looked after her with genuine surprise at the strange quickness with which she made her exit—he could almost have called it her escape. It was scarcely like Stella—his Stella—to vanish in that abrupt way, as if leaving him were a pleasure and a relief.

"Youth is a great mistake," said the gentleman poet to himself. "The freshness of its skin and the beauty of its emotions are more than balanced by its frivolities and selfishness. The restless inability of this child of mine to sit still for half an hour together—the indifference which I am beginning to suspect she feels for my work in comparison with any mindless little diversion, such even as this young man's unintellectual conversation—both perplex and

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annoy me. Ah! my good Matilda was better broken-in than this!—and that precious pearl of maidenhood, that receptive, appreciative, loving little Hortensia would have been infinitely more sympathetic than I find my own child!"

Mr. Branscombe sighed as he thought this—sighed over the want of heart-whole devotion which, though not distinctly manifested, he was beginning to suspect in Stella, the daughter whose highest interests he thought he had consulted by taking her away from her lover and binding close to his own side.

Meanwhile the two young people had clasped hands in the drawing-room; and Randolph had opened at once on the real purport of his visit.

"I have had a letter from Cyril, to-day," he said abruptly.

She flushed, smiled, looked anxious, pleased, excited, earnest. Then the tears rushed into her eyes as she asked in a low voice:

"Yes? and what does he say?"

"Oh, he is so unhappy!" Randolph answered. "And you cannot wonder at it," he added. "It is rough on the poor old fellow; and the wonder is how he gets along at all."

"What can I do?" cried Stella in despair. "I cannot leave papa. He is so helpless alone,

and has become so dependent on me since poor mamma went—I must not leave him."

"But are you never going to marry Cyril?" asked Cyril's friend, opening his large blue eyes.

"Yes, yes! some day," she answered hurriedly.

"Some day?—that is rather vague. Some day?—but when?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know," she said hopelessly.

"He will go to India, and then he will not be back in England for years and years," said Randolph.

The tears came again into her eyes. He felt like an executioner and a brute for giving her so much distress. He would like to have sworn at himself, given himself a knock or a cut somewhere for self-revenge at his brutality; but he was the agent of another; he was not quite responsible; and he must do his duty by Cyril though he did make Stella suffer.

"If I left papa and harm came of it I should feel his murderer," she said. "And he is so sensitive and easily wounded! I should never know a day's peace if I left him."

"And poor Cyril? You do not think of him?" said Randolph.

"He knows that I love him better than my

life—better than anything in the world but my duty. I tell him so in every letter I write," she said, clasping her white hands nervously in each other. "Cyril knows that I do love him! Tell him so—tell him that you know that I do!" she added, looking up into Randolph's face as if he held the destinies of the world in his hands, because he had been made the clumsy, broad-shouldered Mercury for the occasion, trusted with the precious burden of Cyril's love for her and now having to carry back the weight of hers to him.

"I will," said Randolph in a low voice.

How strange it was to him to be thus trusted by her—made her confidant and messenger—and yet how delightful! He had never in his life felt so honoured as now when Stella Branscombe looked up into his face and sent her love by him to Cyril Ponsonby! What a divine creature she was!—how sweet and gracious, how noble and beautiful, how perfect all through—mind and person, character and face alike! Poor Cyril!—no, not poor Cyril—enviable, blessed rather to be the beloved of such a radiant Star as this!

"Is he coming down soon?" then asked Randolph after a pause. "He seems to speak of it in his letter to me."

"I tell him he had better not," answered Stella with a hopeless look and accent.

"Surely yes! You will not let him go to India and not see you before he goes?" asked Randolph hastily.

"I want to see him, oh, more than I can say!" she answered; "but papa was against it when I spoke to him the other day, and said that Cyril must wait. He could not bear to see him just yet; and I could understand that. Poor papa!"

"Oh, that was the reason, then, of this letter to me to-day. Now I can understand it," said Randolph a little bitterly. "'Pon my soul, it is rough on him," he added.

"But if papa objects I cannot help myself," said Stella.

"You owe something to Cyril—surely you owe something to a fellow now you are engaged to him!" pleaded Randolph.

"I know I do; but if papa will not let him come, what can I possibly do?" pleaded in her turn Stella.

"Stick up for your rights," said Cyril's friend.

Again she shook her head.

"It would be impossible against papa's wish and command," she answered. "Girls are not

like boys—we must obey our parents; you need not always, if you do not like."

But Randolph would not allow that.

"Girls have as much right to stick up as men," he said; "and you should not be forced into what you think wrong or do not like."

The conversation turning always round this central point, lasted longer time than Stella knew or had intended. She woke to the fact of the hour with a kind of guilty start; sent Randolph away hurriedly; and went back to her father in his studio, having only made her eyes red, her head ache, her heart more sore than it had been already; and having come no nearer than before to a satisfactory solution of her life's great problem—how to content both Cyril and her father, and how to make each happy at the same time.

"What a terribly long time you have been!" said Mr. Branscombe peevishly, as she entered. "And my work, neglected all these hours—stopping for want of you!"

"I am so sorry, dear papa. I do not know how the time went so fast!" she said ingenuously.

"And what message did he bring from your little friend, Hortensia?" asked that young maiden's elderly idol, stopping in his work of

stippling up a piece of painting supposed to represent Mr. Lyon's pretty and somewhat wrong-headed little daughter.

Stella started. It was not often that she felt the guilty thing, self-convicted, she felt now; but truth to say she had forgotten Hortensia as if she had never existed, and during the whole of that long hour's interview her name had not once been mentioned.

"He did not bring me any," she answered, lowering her eyes.

"Then may I venture to ask of what you have been talking—you and this brainless young man, for a good hour by the clock?" asked her father satirically.

"Cyril," answered Stella simply.

"My dear," said Mr. Branscombe, turning round from his easel and speaking angrily; "that Cyril Ponsonby of yours is becoming a confounded nuisance, and you will have to give him his congé if he intrudes himself thus in all our sacred moments."

"Papa!" she said, looking at him with a white and frightened face.

"If he does not know how to respect your present painful position—if he fails to understand your duties—he must be made," continued Mr. Branscombe, still irate.

"What has he done? Oh, papa! do not speak like that! Cyril has done nothing to vex you. He has been dutiful and patient," said Stella with a sob.

"Be calm, Stella—be calm and reasonable," returned her father. "It argues a lower mental development than I care to see in my child that she should have given her fancy—I can scarcely call it by the sacred name of love—to one so utterly destitute of the higher culture as this young Cyril Ponsonby. And do not cry. Tears spoil a woman's face, and yours in especial. You have not the complexion that supports tears. Besides they are barbarous expressions of feeling, of which the truly civilized ought to be ashamed. Do your duty; trust in Providence; and come to your father's arms!" he added, laying down his palette and brush and opening his arms with half majestic, half paternal tenderness.

"Papa! dear, dear papa! Do not break my heart!" said Stella, burying her face in his bosom and disregarding his injunction by weeping passionately.

"My child! do not you break mine!" he answered gravely, with a tremor in his voice that was one of his most effective bits of histrionic furniture.

And between these two terrible fires of love and duty—these two irreconcilable attachments, each of which was as dear to her as her very life—the poor girl stood as the victim of fate —the Andromeda of sacrifice whom no Persius could deliver.

CHAPTER II.

BY THE LOGIC OF APPEARANCES.

A COMMISSION from Mr. Branscombe was no sinecure. Like all well-born amateurs he despised "professionals" while profiting by their technical ability, and maintained that the general refinement belonging to a cultivated gentleman gave more real insight than the mere mechanical ability of man who had learned only that one thing. He was an admirer of what Americans call an all-round man; and he was himself, to his own mind, emphatically that man. Consequently, thinking that he knew better in all things—save how to manipulate the materials—than the artist whom he had employed, and though the work was already in the stone-cutter's hands, he worried Sandro Kemp over this monument to his good Matilda, as Mrs. Prinsep's unfortunate lodger had never

been worried before; sending for him at all unearthly and inconvenient times to come up to Rose Hill that this point might be considered, that new idea ventilated, such and such an alteration made and such and such an improvement added.

"Sandro Kemp is all very well as a skilled artisan," he said to Stella with his finest air; "but he is only a poor creature when you come to creative imagination. He wants the application of the divine fire to be made anything of. It is singular how difficult it is to find a man with any real genius," he added. "How soulless and dead all these professional fellows are! Compared to men of real artistic feeling, of real æsthetic refinement, they are merely hodmen of a superior kind—bricklayers and carpenters who have learned the use of their tools and can turn out work more or less mechanically correct. But when you come to genius, then," said Mr. Branscombe, lightly laying his white fingers on his somewhat narrow and certainly shallow breast, "you must have the gentleman, not the professional!"

And Stella believed her dear papa implicitly. Nevertheless, hearing as she did all that went on, she could not quite shut her ears or blind her eyes to the fact that after all it was really

Sandro who had the better taste and the superior judgment—Sandro who negatived and Sandro who proposed—and that her beloved and elegant father's ideas were gently but inexorably set aside and shown to be impossible, impracticable and inadmissible. She was half inclined to quarrel with the artist for his tenacity and presumption; only that she could not deny what was so patent—the better treatment of her dear mother's monument in his hands.

And thus again, between the living and the dead, was in her mind the same kind of distracted loyalty as that which existed between her father and her lover; and she found the full, free devotion to that sublime parental Apollo hedged round with strange difficulties and wicked little thorns of mental opposition. But the habits of a life are hard to change and the religion of youth clings close. The worship of her father, inculcated from her earliest days, was as the marrow of her bones, the very blood of her heart; and it would take more than the evidence of false artistic taste to warp her loving nature from its early loyalty or substitute for her present fond belief the colder judgment of criticism and doubt.

One day however, when Sandro had been

up to Rose Hill as usual, and had also as usual been obliged to prove the infallible amateur all wrong and grossly ignorant of the first principles of that art whereof he professed to be a master, he met Stella's eyes fixed on him with a strange expression of mingled surprise and fear. It was one of those looks which reveal more than the person is conscious of feeling; like the first automatic movements of a sleeper beginning to awake. It was the flash of a moment—the first stirring of the sleeping perception; but Sandro, who could read the human face as other men read books—save when his eyes were blinded by his heart—understood the significance and foreshadowing of that strange expression and thought to himself that he must be more careful, more discreet for the future, and manage somehow to unite with greater delicacy his own self-respect as an artist with kindly regard for her filial superstition. Which was about the most difficult thing in the world when dealing with Mr. Branscombe on any matter whatever in the presence of his daughter.

Sandro saw too, how ill and changed she was; and this was another inducement to him to be tender of that maddening old humbug, as he mentally called the Finery Fred of forty

years ago, for her poor dear sake if in no wise for his own.

That look of latent terror at what was before her to discover and the signs of her failing health still haunting him, Sandro, coming along the road, saw at a little distance Augusta Latrobe walking in her quiet leisurely way, taking her boy for his afternoon run. The two had not met since the famous picnic, now some weeks old; and Sandro fancied that he had been nursing his jealousy and disappointment into a very good beginning of indifference, and that really the fair-faced widow was no more to him than any other pretty woman who looked well in a picture, and was pleasant to talk to because soft in voice and reasonable in thought. He scarcely expected his heart to beat as it did when he turned the corner and saw her handsome figure coming to meet him with that undulating grace for which she was famous. He was vexed that his blood should dash through his veins at this headlong speed—for which however the weather alone was answerable. It happened to be a chilly and unpleasant day, but our variable old atmosphere is the general scapegoat all round, and blow hot blow cold is ever in fault.

As soon as Augusta saw who it was in the

light brown suit that was striding between the hedgerows, she drew her veil over her face; and, Sandro being in that state compared to which the porcupine is ideal smoothness, winced at the action. It never entered into his head, which the wound in his heart made abnormally dense, that it was to put up a screen against self-betrayal. It was a screen sure enough, but against him not herself. And it checked the impulse which else he might have had, to tell her all about himself and his two grand commissions and how at last the door seemed opening which was to lead him into the great temple of fame and the treasure-house of wealth. No; she cared nothing for him, he thought bitterly. Why should he oppress her with his confidence, and claim for his good fortune that sympathy which she had evidently denied to his bad? No; let himself and all that made his life—all the facts of his career and all the feelings of his soul—be obliterated. He was nothing to her. Why then waste his strength in trying to waken the dead?—to make the deaf hear and the dumb speak?

If he had put his sensations into words, this would have been the form they would have taken, as he rapidly narrowed the distance which lay between him and Augusta, till he

came close to her and could see her sweet face even through that insulting screen of gauze. For half an instant he intended only to bow and pass on. It would be more dignified and more manly. But something stronger than his pride held his feet, and he stopped almost against his will, and held out his hand.

The boy ran up to him full of a child's caressing pleasure when he hails one who is always kind and pleasant and is therefore beloved; one associated in his little mind with now a top and now a ball, sometimes a picture and once a grand treat which he should never forget—a whole boxful of chocolates! The widow's colour mounted to her cheeks in that pretty pale pink blush which was so becoming, yet which betrayed so little conscious confusion; and then the two clasped hands, and Sandro's good imitation of indifference fell to pieces like a broken marionette.

He loved her. Yes; he loved her. His love was hopeless and not returned; that he knew now if once he had thought somewhat differently; still, he loved her, and he should love her for the whole of his life. But what hope was there for him in that quiet manner, that calm voice, those clear and steadfast eyes which neither wavered nor fell, neither darkened nor

softened?—eyes which looked at him as steadily as a child's, and yet not quite full into his. His indifference was only feigned, but hers—hers was real.

Flung off from his own concerns Sandro, half in earnest about Stella, half to make some kind of relation, however shadowy, with Augusta, told her how ill the girl was looking and asked her boldly to go to Rose Hill and see her. She would be sure to do the poor thing good, he added with more meaning in his words than he cared to show. If she would talk to her and be kind and sympathetic, she could do her so much good!

This function of talking to people and doing them good was one of Augusta Latrobe's offices, assigned to her by universal belief and consent. She was a woman in whose beneficent influence every one who knew her had unbounded confidence. She was assumed to have an almost magnetic power over the minds of others; and "Get Mrs. Latrobe to talk to her" or "him" was a formula in common use at Highwood when there was a recalcitrant or a hot-headed member of the community whom others wished to bring into the way of reason and conformity. So now Sandro said to her, according to the popular temper and belief: "I have just come

from Rose Hill, where I wish you would go and talk to poor Miss Branscombe!"

"You are often at Rose Hill now," said Augusta, letting the request lie while she took up only the statement.

"Yes; that eternal monument will never be at an end until it is finally put up; and perhaps not then," he answered.

"I heard you had undertaken poor darling Mrs. Branscombe's monument," she returned.

"Who told you?" he asked smiling.

"Colonel Moneypenny," she answered, with admirable self-possession and blameless cruelty.

"I do not know that it was any business of his," said Sandro quickly, his eyes very dark and his face very pale.

"In a small place like this everything is every one's business," she answered. "At all events every one knows that you have this monument to do."

"I wanted to tell you myself," he said, forgetting the resolution of his offended dignity.

"That I might congratulate or condole?" she answered lightly. "I am glad that you have an opportunity of showing us what you can do; but I should think to work with or for Mr. Branscombe would take all the gilt off the ginger-bread—if it were an inch thick!"

"Yes it does," he answered; "and the pleasure is dearly bought. But I want to speak to you of poor Miss Branscombe. I wish you would go up and see her," he repeated.

"Why?" she returned, looking up with a half-sad, half-amused smile.

"Because if you would talk to her you would do her good," he said.

The smile brightened into a laugh.

"Every one comes to me to talk to people," she said. "What do you want me to say?"

"I do not know," he answered simply. "If I did perhaps I should have said it myself. But she is looking distressingly ill, and she is manifestly out of spirits altogether. I think her father keeps her too close and that she wants more change, more companionship, more fresh air —in short, rousing out of herself, poor thing."

"That is a case for Dr. Quigley, not for me," said Augusta, as the doctor's high gig and fast trotter rounded the corner and came at a swift pace towards them.

"Confound the fellow!" muttered Sandro, who wished the doctor and his machine at the bottom of the Red Sea; but he put on the hypocritical smile of conventional welcome, and said nothing about the fate of Pharaoh and his hosts, as he gave the doctor "Good-day."

"Dr. Quigley, Mr. Kemp has something to say to you," said Augusta quite gravely, as the doctor stopped his horse and looked at the two, keenly, searchingly, as he had looked at them on the day of the picnic when they were all assembled at Crossing's Bridge.

"Say? what?" he asked.

"Only that I think Miss Branscombe is looking ill, and that her father keeps her too much shut up in that stifling room he calls his studio," said Sandro Kemp, he too speaking with the most praiseworthy gravity, and as if Stella's health were really the only thing that lay between the widow and himself—the only chord that vibrated in unison.

"And I am to interfere?" asked Dr. Quigley.

"Yes," both answered together.

"My dear people," he returned with energy; "are you living in Arcadia? The man who would not take care of his wife with heart-disease is not likely to look after his daughter without. The only chance is that Stella Branscombe should understand her true position and her father's illimitable selfishness—and then break her heart at the discovery. If ever she comes to know what he is, and takes action on her knowledge, she will die under the self-reproach of a parricide. When the conscience

is included in upholding a sham, and sacrificing the truth for a living lie has all the force and meaning of virtue, you cannot do anything. Stella Branscombe is a martyr to filial love, and her father is a parental sham; but she must fight it out by herself."

"But it is pitiable to see her!" said Sandro warmly.

"Things might be worse if she were enlightened," said the doctor. "I question if she would live through the discovery. Take my advice, both of you;—do not mix yourself up in this matter. No outsider interfering, even with the best motives, in family matters, does good or escapes personal damage. Why burn your fingers when there are no chestnuts to pick out for yourself or for others? I will keep an eye on the poor young lady, and put in my word when I see her really in danger; but until then remonstrance would only irritate Mr. Branscombe and make matters worse. Good day; take care of yourselves," he added significantly as he drove off; leaving a certain uneasy doubt in Augusta's mind as to what was really meant by taking care of themselves. But she supposed it was only because of her desire to "talk to" Stella Branscombe. It could not be anything else.

"I think Dr. Quigley is right," she said with false equanimity, as he drove away. "I do not mind speaking to Stella, or to any one, if I think I can be of use; and I am no more afraid of Mr. Branscombe, for all his fine airs and superiority, than I am of one of those sheep in the field. But I do not think I can do any good. Stella has taken her part; and, as Dr. Quigley says, she must fight it out by herself."

"I should have been glad if you had followed my suggestion," said the artist with a sore manner.

She looked him full in the face.

"Are you too, one of the men who would rather be personally pleased by obedience than know that opposition had been the more reasonable action?" she asked gravely. "I had thought not. If you are one of those people I would rather not be enlightened."

"You are the one perfect woman in the world!" he said warmly.

She laughed and turned away, looking at her boy.

"No," she answered after a short pause; "I am only reasonable."

Nevertheless she determined in her own mind that she would go and see Stella Branscombe to-morrow; only what good she was to

do when she had gone, was of all questions at this moment the most unanswerable.

She held out her hand in sign of leave-taking. He took it and kept it.

"I know you will be glad to hear that I have received my order," he then said gazing into her face. "I am to have Mr. Woodley's mansion, and I have finished my designs for the Lingstone Cathedral. I think they come well enough to bear competition; and I am not afraid of the future."

"I am very glad," she answered, imprudently letting her hand lie in his for congratulation.

It was a most unpardonable piece of folly in so reasonable a woman; but human nature is weak and foolish even at the best, and has a trick of leaving the little postern gate open after it has carefully shut close the great main entrance. For not only did that soft submission to the more impulsive action of the artist rouse thoughts and awaken hopes which had better be left dormant, but it put the pretty widow into a false position with others as well, and gave a handle for thoughtlessness, if not ill-nature, to turn the grindstone against her.

To Gip and Pip, coming streaming along the road, the sight of those two standing there, hand in hand, looking into each other's eyes,

was too sweet a nut to be left uncracked. The discovery of "spoons" was a true godsend to them, and they were sure to make the world a generous present of all they lighted on in the way of erotic treasures. As destitute of delicacy as of spite, they never thought they could do harm by their œcumenical confidence. If they had they would have shut those wide-open mouths of theirs, and kept the secret religiously. But as they did not mind how much they themselves were chaffed they supposed every one else must be as thick-skinned and insensitive; and thus, the suspicion of the Doves that anything was on hand, came to be a kind of nightmare to hesitating, shy, undeclared, or as in this case unwilling, lovers. Nevertheless, the thing had come; and Gip and Pip, the most good-natured, inconsiderate and innocent mischief-makers in Highwood, had found the penniless widow and impecunious artist standing in the high-road hand in hand, and looking —"Oh!" said Gip; "looking spoons as big as tureens at each other!"

And let old Mrs. Morshead but once get hold of that idea, and then where would be poor Augusta's peace of mind and security of tenure! The widow was equal to the occasion, however, as she generally was; and as the twins

came up she repeated in a clear, ringing voice:

"I am indeed glad, Mr. Kemp, and congratulate you!"

"On what?" shouted the Doves, full of wicked laughter and radiant detection.

"Ah, what!" said Mrs. Latrobe, also laughing in the most natural way in the world. "You must ask Mr. Kemp himself. He has just done me the honour to make me his confidante on a most important matter; but I must not pass it on. If he likes to include you, well and good; but you see I am bound to secrecy!"

"What is it, Mr. Kemp?" asked Gip and Pip together. "Are you going to be married? Are you? If you are, oh! do tell us who it is. Any one here? It must be some one here! Who is it, Augusta? I am sure you know!" with more wickedness of laughter, more radiance of detection.

"Well, no, I can answer so much," said Augusta, her gaiety of humour still matching theirs. "It is not to any one here. But I must leave you to find it all out by yourselves. Good-bye, girls. Good-bye, Mr. Kemp, and be quite sure I will never tell!"

On which she went off still laughing, leaving Sandro Kemp struck dumb with amazement.

His man's slower brain had not discerned the danger which had been palpable at the first flash to her; and, not understanding the peril, he did not understand the way of escape. He was bewildered. All this laughter and phantasmagoric mystery made him feel as if suddenly surrounded by a crowd of mocking elves who took his senses clean away and made the things which had hitherto been clear and solid appear vague and visionary. What did it all mean? Why did they all laugh? and at what were they all hinting? Married? Confidence? Secrets? It was a puzzle from first to last, and he could see nothing better for it than to follow blindly the bewildering lead that had been given him, and shake his head knowingly as he laughed without sense or meaning, and answered in the air:

"Ah, what? Wait till I tell you! I will some day."

On which he dashed off on his way, as if escaping from pursuers; and Gip and Pip ran after Augusta and besieged her with questions for a full half-hour by the church clock. But they got nothing out of her save vague suggestions which only served to make their mad guesses surer. Either it was an engagement to some one not at Highwood, of which the

secret had been confided to Augusta, or—was it, could it be, Augusta herself? For what else could they make of that attitude, those looks on the broad highway, and the "spoons as big as tureens" exchanged between the two?

CHAPTER III.

THE CRITIC OF PURE REASON.

Our true masters are our servants. From the dark background of the kitchen they rule the house, dictate our actions and set the lines of our public repute; we, all the while, thinking that we rule them while they govern us. And the Rose Hill servants were no exception to the rule. Jones had given it as his opinion that Miss Stella was kept far too close by her pa'; and the servants' hall had agreed with him that it would be good for her to see more company and be brightened up a bit. Wherefore, in spite of the standing order that "Mr. and Miss Branscombe were not at home" when intrusive visitors chose to call, the day after this odd misleading interview on the high-road, he let in Augusta Latrobe, and took the chance of a wigging from his old master, as he said,

for the sake of doing a good turn by his young mistress.

"Mrs. Latrobe? I cannot see her! Tell her I am indisposed—engaged—out—anything you like; but I cannot see her!" said Mr. Branscombe peevishly. "How often must I repeat it, Jones, I am not at home to any one excepting on business, or where I myself give leave?"

"Mrs. Latrobe seemed very earnest, sir, to see Miss Branscombe," said the man with respectful pertinacity. "She would not take a refusal."

"Then she should have been made," said Mr. Branscombe crossly; but Stella, with something of her mother's weary look added to her own more excited nervousness, said quickly:

"Poor Augusta! I should like to see her, dear papa, if you do not mind. I have not seen her for such a long time now; and she was such a favourite with poor mamma!"

"Your dear mother made a great many undesirable favourites," said Mr. Branscombe significantly. "However, if you wish it, I will spare you for a little while; and—stay, I myself will go with you," he added with an indescribable air of condescension. "As you say, Mrs. Latrobe was a favourite with your poor

mother, and I shall pay respect to her memory by conquering my own dislike and receiving her friend with courtesy and distinction. Jones, tell Mrs. Latrobe that Miss Branscombe and I will join her immediately."

What a wicked girl she was growing! thought Stella to herself. Why did she feel that strange sense of check and chillness when her dear father said that he also would see Mrs. Latrobe? Why should she not be as glad now as she would have been in former days? Poor papa! He had doomed himself as well as her to this close, shut-up, solitary and eminently mournful life. It was as good, then, for him as for her, to have a break; and she was abominably wicked to wish that he had kept away. Nevertheless she did, with a distinct if momentary consciousness that overwhelmed her first with disappointment and then with a feeling of sin and shame. She went up to her father and took his arm with a gesture that looked like spontaneity of love; in fact, it was unspoken contrition.

"Dear papa!" she said fondly.

"There, there, that will do, Stella!" he answered impatiently. She disturbed his thoughts and broke through the rhythm of his movements; and Mr. Branscombe liked to have his

love, like everything else, served up at the very right moment and in just the manner and amount congenial to him at the time. "You must not allow your affection, my dear, to become exigeante and ennuyante!" he said; "or to tread on the limits of graver subjects."

To which she answered humbly: "No, papa;" but she felt wounded now as well as wicked and repentant.

"It will gratify her if I give her an early copy of this," then said Mr. Branscombe, taking one from a pile of quarto-sized black-bordered and hot-pressed cards which had come in from the printers' this morning.

It was his Threnody, printed in silver lettering, to be distributed among his friends. Photographs of himself and his good Matilda headed the double columns into which the poem was divided; and in the middle, above the title, was a confused jumble of mortuary symbols printed in flat deep black. The contrast of black and white gave the card a curiously piebald appearance; but Mr. Branscombe thought the mixture effective, and the sentiment which united saintly beatitude with earthly mourning one of supreme poetic excellence.

This was the pleasure, the dissipation and the vanity of his later years. His old place as

Beauty-man and Finery Fred—his old character of lady-killer—had dropped from him by the force of circumstances, but not his ambition to be Somebody in his society. He had elected to be that Somebody in the field of æsthetics where no one in Highwood could touch him—not even, in his own estimation, Sandro Kemp, the professional artist. And the exquisite delight to him of printing in a luxurious form his poetry and his music, and then distributing copies to all in the place, was almost as great as had been formerly that of picking up another and yet another little heart found fluttering at his feet, and adding one more to the secret list—he had it yet—of confessed victims to his irresistible charms.

"She will be flattered and gratified," he repeated, carefully choosing a copy where his own photograph pleased him; and Stella answered in all good faith: "Yes." And yet—why did she sigh as she spoke?

As the two came into the drawing-room together, Augusta felt exactly the same sense of disappointment and chill that Stella had felt before her; without adding to it the poor girl's shame for sin.

"What a dreadful creature he is!" she thought, as the scented, well-curled, melan-

choly and elegant widower came slowly forward, evidencing the grace of refined gentlehood and the force of grief in equal proportions.

"What an affected old horror!" she thought again, smiling with the forced hypocrisy of society as she returned the greeting which he made with stately courtesy.

He was not what he would have called "fond of" Augusta Latrobe. Her critical judgment and unenthusiastic reasonableness annoyed him; but even when he was not fond of people he was never less than elegant. He liked to feel sure that when they went away, though they might say he had been distant, they must confess he had been superior.

"Here is a little thing I threw off the other day," he said, handing her the card. "I have brought you the first copy, Mrs. Latrobe, knowing the reverent affection that you had for my poor wife and her kindly interest in you. The sacredness of the subject and the tenderness of the feeling with which it has been composed will condone its shortcomings," he added with mock humility; shortcomings in his work being like the squaring of the circle or the discovery of perpetual motion.

Augusta received the card with tranquil politeness, but without warmth or enthusiasm.

She did not, as he hoped she would, run over the poetry with that greedy kind of haste which predestines admiration, nor did she even look at his photograph. She turned to that of Mrs. Branscombe, and tears stole between her eyelids as she looked.

"Thank you, Mr. Branscombe," she said gently. "How like her! Sweet darling! how like it is!"

And this was her sole word of commendation to the poet.

When he had shown the proofs to Hortensia she had wept over his noble lines; and especially had that touching couplet which led off the rest—

> Sweet spirit, calling softly from the tomb
> Where death has laid thee in Cimmerian gloom—

seemed to her the soul of all that was majestic, eloquent and tender. But Mrs. Latrobe, scarcely glancing at the silvered page, said nothing more than: "Thank you," and concentrated her attention on her dead friend's photograph which evidently interested her infinitely more than did his living lines.

Mr. Branscombe could not choose but mark the difference between these first two recipients of his poem. How much the balance of good

taste, good feeling, appreciation and poetic insight went to the side of his pretty little Puritan devotee!—and how strongly confirmed was his own impression that his good Matilda had had the habit of making very undesirable favourites indeed!

But it was not in flesh and blood—at least not in Mr. Branscombe's flesh and blood—to remain content with such short measure. For what reward did he work, live laborious days and sleepless nights, he said, but for the praise of his fellowmen? He was not ashamed to confess his ambition. That last infirmity of noble minds was no spot on the face of his spiritual sun. For if he had the one he surely had the other. His ambition pre-supposed his nobility, and he was quite content to confess the one if credited with the other. He was intensely disgusted with Mrs. Latrobe. Her want of appreciation was a mark of intellectual crassitude, which by rights should have debarred her for the future from the privilege of his society. He would have refused to continue an acquaintance with one who had eaten pease with his knife; and surely this was even worse taste and the mark of a still lower condition! Nevertheless, he could not be at ease until he had forced from her politeness that acknowledgment of

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his genius which she would not give by the generosity of her judgment. Going over to her as she sat on the ottoman, holding the card in her hand and still lovingly examining the sweet face of her dead friend, he sat down in the division next to hers. Leaning over her shoulder with a confidential as well as patronizing air, he said:

"Allow me to read to you my little tribute to her dear memory, Mrs. Latrobe. An author knows his work better than any one else; and the first rendering of a poem sets the measure and gives the sense in perpetuity. The poet alone can render his lines in that perfection which ensures complete understanding. Allow me."

He took the card from her hand and placed himself in his bardic attitude—his hands well displayed, his head well up, his small feet, which the large bow in his shoes made still more delicate, in a graceful position, the fingers of his left hand laid lightly on his chest. And when he had arranged his person according to rule, he opened the wearisome fusillade of his recitation, and mouthed through his Threnody in the manner of a fifth-rate actor playing Hamlet in a barn.

When he had finished, he sighed deeply and handed back the card. Augusta took it with a

faint inclination of her head and a wholly unintelligible murmur that might mean anything or nothing.

"How do you think they go?" asked Mr. Branscombe after a moment's pause. "Well?"

"Very smoothly," answered Augusta.

She could say so much in truth; for, in reading, all the redundant feet were cleverly jumped over and all the gaps were as cleverly filled in by newly-created syllables, so that the measure flowed with tolerable ease and the actual dislocations were not noticeable.

Mr. Branscombe smiled.

"I am glad you like it," he said. "I own I do also. I consider it the most satisfactory thing I have ever done; and an author is the best judge of his own work. I think these lines are fine," he continued, pointing out a passage; "and these again," indicating another. "This image is bold, is it not?" he next asked, repeating a phrase which contained two false quantities and nineteen words of absolute nonsense; "and this metaphor reads well?" he said again, half chanting a certain couplet, then pausing for her reply.

But now, when Augusta came full front with a fact which she had either to praise or to blame, she could not do such violence to her

critical judgment as to endorse it. Had Mr. Branscombe been content with generalities she would have followed his lead and would have slid lightly over the dangerous places; but when he asked her direct approbation of a passage which said how the laughing hour that struck at this sweet spirit's birth had now run down and lost itself in the great sea of eternity, she took her stand and entered her demurrer.

"I think it wants a little clearness," she answered.

"So? and where? The Hours which dance around Aurora's car—the home domestic clock—the sands of time—the tide of life—these are the ideas contained in the image," he returned.

"Yes, but the classic Hour did not strike, and a clock does not run down into the sea," she said quite gravely.

"There would be no poetry at all, my dear Mrs. Latrobe, if we poets were confined by the dull cords of prosaic fact," he said, amiably condescending to her ignorance and what he mentally called her earth-worminess. "All true poetry encloses as much as it embodies. You must read between the lines and find for yourself the statue within the marble. The value of the image is its comprehensiveness, its

subtlety of suggestiveness, its combination of ideas, the facetted quality of its reflectivity. Guido's Aurora and the grave diction of modern ethics—where could you meet with a more prolific combination, a more precious embalmment of diversified thought?"

"I dare say not," said Augusta the earthworm; "still I think it wants a little clearing up and bringing out."

"Now that I have explained it?" he asked.

"I see your meaning of course," she answered reluctantly.

Even this admission tried her.

"And, seeing, you justify?"

She laughed. "I am so stupid in things of this kind!" she said. "My opinion is worthless."

"No, pardon me, lady, not in the least so," he returned. "Molière's servant-maid stands as a sign to all of us, creative geniuses. What we write we naturally wish to be understood by the world at large, else we labour in vain. Herewith I except, of course, that audience, fit though few, which is the consecrated interpreter of our esoteric meaning. But the verdict of that intelligence which represents the majority is useful to us as a guide and gauge. I am therefore glad to hear your objections. They

represent to us the non-conducting power of the larger half of the brain-world, and by them I can feel the pulse of the general intellect more clearly."

"I am your foolometer?" She laughed again, her bright eyes twinkling.

He bent his handsome head with elaborate grace.

"I did not say so," he returned gravely.

During all this time Stella had not spoken. She was sitting on the other side of Augusta Latrobe, looking alternately at her father and his critic, but taking no part in the discussion. She greatly wondered at Augusta's boldness, and ardently wished that she would close her mouth, or open it only to praise and speak poor dear papa fair. And she ardently wished too, that she could get a word alone with her mother's favourite, her own dear friend albeit an earth-worm on the lower levels; though what she had to say in confidence that her father might not hear, she would have been hard put to it to tell. Floating thoughts of her mother, of Cyril, of freer breathing, of some change of subject, came and went like shadows through her mind; but if it was not to be, it was not, she said to herself with a sigh. Yet how much she should have enjoyed a long,

sweet, quiet talk on everything, or on nothing, with the sense of mental freedom and personal sympathy in her kind companion!

Taking advantage of this slight change of front from his work to herself, Augusta turned rather abruptly to Stella. Like every one else she saw how changed the poor girl was. No longer the serenely bright, untroubled Star of olden days, she was now careworn and anxious, with the watchful eyes of a person either too heavily taxed or ever in fear; and her face had a fevered look that made her beauty melancholy to contemplate because so dangerously brightened by inward excitement.

"Are you well, dear Stella?" asked the widow abruptly, laying her hand on hers and feeling the fever through her gloves.

"I? Oh, yes, quite!" said Stella with that hysterical little laugh which so pitifully belies itself.

"You do not look so; and how hot your hand is!" said Augusta. "What have you been doing all the day?"

"I have been with papa in the studio," answered the girl.

"Not out, this lovely day?"

Stella glanced at her father.

"No, not yet," she answered.

"What have you been doing, dearie, that has kept you so busy?" asked Augusta, still inquisitorial.

"I have been copying music," said Stella.

She did not add, as she might: "And I have been called off this, the ostensible work of the day, at least once in every ten minutes, to examine the new touches on this square inch of painting, to hear the sonorous consonance of these two jingling rhymes, to give my criticism which means praise here, to add my opinion which means concurrence there. I have not been left even to my dull mechanical occupation in peace; but I have been mentally tormented as much as absorbed—absorbed as so much food, so much electricity is absorbed by something which can do no good, however much it may be bolstered up, and which simply beggars and exhausts that by which it is supplied."

This was the real reason why "work" for Mr. Branscombe was so profoundly destructive to his associate. It was this perpetual drain, this incessant going out, coupled with unrest, which had killed that good Matilda and which was now wasting and fevering Stella.

"But copying music from morning till night will kill you, child!" said the widow with friendly haste. "You ought to change your

occupation more than that. Have you read your week's books yet?"

This meant the books of the Reading Society to which all Highwood belonged.

"No," said Stella.

"You naughty girl! and they were so interesting! I hope that you have copied that pretty crewel pattern in the *Lady's Newspaper?* we are all doing it," said the widow.

"No; I have not had time," answered Stella.

"Stella! you idle child! What have you been doing?"

"Working for papa," said Stella.

The widow gave a little impatient movement with her pretty shoulders.

"Well, but working for papa cannot mean everything and all day long," she said, laughing to hide her vexation. "I see what it is, I shall have to come and look after you! I cannot have you grow idle. And one thing certainly that you ought to do is to go and take a nice long walk. It is a sin to stay in the house such a day as this. Come with Tony and me. The little scamp jumped into a puddle and made himself too disreputable for your drawing-room, so I left him at the Lodge. But come with us, like a dear. It will do you good."

"I do not know that papa can spare me,"

said Stella in a hesitating way, the colour coming into her face.

Mr. Branscombe was still sitting in his bardic attitude, chasing a poetic image round about the corners of the ceiling, and as if absorbed in thought. He started at this last mention of his name, and brought his eyes down from the ceiling to his daughter.

"Yes, my dear? You spoke? Pardon me, I did not hear what you said;" he exclaimed as if newly awakened and a little confused, but always courteous and graceful.

"I want Stella to go out for a walk—to come with me and Tony," Augusta answered instead of the girl. "She is looking so pale, and as if she wanted a little change and fresh air. You can spare her, cannot you, Mr. Branscombe? She is afraid that you cannot, poor dear!"

"I can spare her, of course! My desire could not possibly stand in the way of hers," said Mr. Branscombe with fine paternal chivalrousness of feeling. "It is not a question of myself, but of her own feelings. In her deep mourning would she care to be seen outside the sacred precincts of home?"

"If you think it unbecoming, papa, of course not," said Stella.

"Your own heart must decide that question, my love," he answered. "Observance is valueless when not spontaneously offered. Enforced tribute is dross."

"But, Mr. Branscombe, a little walk can do no harm!" said Augusta, rather too warmly for prudence. "If you do not like Stella to be seen on the roads we will go by the fields where we shall not meet a creature. She really ought to go out! Even a drive in a close carriage would be better than nothing; but a good brisk walk would be the best of all."

"If you have the heart to go with Mrs. Latrobe and take a good, brisk, happy walk, go by all means, my love," said her father, answering Augusta through Stella. "Your dear mother's sainted spirit looking down on you will forgive the perhaps natural exuberance of youth—its perhaps natural demand for recreation, even at the most solemn seasons."

"But, Mr. Branscombe," again remonstrated Augusta; "a little walk in the fields—that is not like pleasure taken in the world and society."

"I say so! Stella can go if she will. I give her the free exercise of her own judgment," repeated Mr. Branscombe. "As I say, I want no tribute rendered to the memory of

my lost dear one that does not come from the pure well of love undefiled. Go, my Stella—forget your grief, your mourning, your mother and me, in a brisk and happy walk with Mrs. Latrobe. I do not wish to deprive you of your pleasure, my love."

"No, dear papa, I will not go," said Stella. "Perhaps, as you say, it would be unbecoming."

"And the consequence of all this exaggeration will be that you will get ill, Stella darling, and then you will have made bad worse," said Augusta hastily. "All this kind of thing is really not reasonable!"

"'The Critic of Pure Reason,'" said Mr. Branscombe, with a polite sneer. "Neither poetry of idea nor pathos of feeling—only the crystalline clearness of cold, icy reason!"

"Just so," said Mrs. Latrobe with an exasperating smile. "You could not have paid me a higher compliment, Mr. Branscombe. So let reason be your guide, dearest Stella, and come out with me for a breath of fresh air."

"No," said Stella, whose wish had now died down; "I see that papa is right. I will not go to-day, thank you—some day, but not just yet."

"My good child! guided with the finest silken thread! all heart and conscience!" cried Mr. Branscombe fondly.

And Stella, still under the spell of her early training and the glamour of her filial superstition, was satisfied and soothed; better pleased to have won her father's approbation than to have had that little break in the melancholy monotony of her life. And yet—how beautiful it was out of doors!—and how delicious a swift walk in the fields with that pleasant-tempered Augusta Latrobe would have been!

CHAPTER IV.

THIN ICE.

Suddenly the fount ran dry. The seed-time was over and that of the harvest had set in. That harvest was the praise of the public, such as it was at Highwood, when the poems were printed ready for distribution—the music composed ready for recitation—the pictures framed and varnished, and cards of invitation sent out in travesty of the artist's "private view." Then Mr. Branscombe was in the seventh heaven of delight. That last infirmity of his nobleness was fulfilled and he was the veritable Apollo of his own Parnassus. For the present therefore, what it pleased him to call his work was done, and it was time that fruition should follow upon labour.

But because he had made their yet young mourning a reason why Stella had been kept so

close to work in copying and recopying his productions that she had not been allowed even a walk in the lonely lanes or quiet fields, it was necessary for him to find a reason now why he should break so suddenly through the seclusion which had been due to his vanity and ascribed to his sorrow. And he found it in his daughter's pallor and Mrs. Latrobe's suggestion.

"You are looking a little pale, my child," he said the day after Augusta's visit, speaking as if this were his own discovery, and speaking with his best air of fatherly tenderness. "I must not have you fail, my love! We must break through our sad seclusion and go out into the world a little more than we have done of late. It will be a trial to me, but it is my duty to you."

"I should be sorry if you did anything painful to yourself for my sake, dearest papa," said Stella gently.

He sighed.

"You are all that is left to me; I must take care of you," he said. "I must be father and mother both to my Household Star!"

"Dear papa! how good you are!" said Stella, looking at him with grateful eyes.

"Yes; I am a good father to you and I was a good husband to your dear mother. The

artist has not killed the man in me!" he answered, honestly believing what he said; for his vanity was so great, his selfishness so blindly sincere, that he did faithfully hold himself to be the sublime and all but perfect creature for which he posed. And when he had sacrificed his good Matilda, and was now sacrificing his daughter, to this vanity, this selfishness, he was to his own mind doing only what was right and holy. Taking the help of the lower creature in the production of such works as his made their glory as well as his own. They aided where he created, and they were honoured by their association with his genius. So much must be said for him. False as he was all through—mere mask, wind-bag, simulacrum as he was—he was unconsciously false. He lived in a world of his own where he was what he assumed to be. It would have taken a miracle to have convinced him that he was less than a genius and lower than a hero. This world scarcely gives enough credit to the transforming power of vanity—to the sincerity of a man's own self-deception; but Mr. Branscombe was really and truly in a self-evolved golden cloud through which he saw nothing as it was and himself the most transformed of all. Had he been self-condemned through conscious-

ness he could not have imposed even on Stella as he did. It was the very sincerity of his vanity which gave it vitality and impressiveness and which hid his own humbug from others as well as from himself.

"And as you are so pale and wan, my love," he went on to say affectionately; "I will take you for an airing and carry you among your friends. So, go and make yourself ready. I have ordered the carriage for three o'clock. We will make a little round, and I will take our friends these cards. They will appreciate the attention."

"Very well, papa," said Stella without a smile or sign of pleasure.

She dare not say so, but how much better she would have liked a walk across the fields, and those cards not distributed nor those visits paid! She scarcely knew herself in those latter days, nor understood why she shrank with such sensitive shame from the artistic publicity which was her father's glory and until now had been her own proud delight. What made her dread where formerly she had rejoiced?—dislike what she had loved? She could not shake off the feeling of desecration to her mother's memory in all these poems and pictures, these nocturnes and the like, which were

sent about among the neighbours like bellman's verses. Yet how could papa's beautiful work desecrate that dear memory? And would papa do anything whatever that was not inspired by the most sublime and delicate feeling?—papa, who paid such enthusiastic respect to that beloved memory as even to object to her having fresh air and exercise? It was impossible; and Stella knew that it was impossible.

Nevertheless, she wished that he had not taken those silver-printed cards to distribute; and that they had simply gone only for a walk together.

As it was impossible for her to say all this, and as she had not even thought it out clearly to herself, she did as she was bidden, and put on her hat and cape. Then they got into the little brougham where Mr. Branscombe had placed a pile of cards already enclosed in envelopes and directed. Before they set off he drew up both windows save for the space of an inch on his own side. Sitting so much in his close hot studio had spoiled his taste for fresh air, and he dreaded cold almost as much as if he had been a dormouse. Sherrardine was the first place to which they went. It was the farthest off, and Mr. Branscombe took it first, meaning to work round by Mrs. Morshead—

from whom the interdict had been perforce taken since poor Mrs. Branscombe's death—and then on to Derwent Lodge. The first two stood in the social column of disagreeable necessity; the last in that of unmixed pleasure. The gentle worship of pretty Hortensia Lyon was Finery Fred's present portion of delight in life. Twenty years ago it would have been receiving back in earnest the love made in jest; now he found it in mock genius and sincere praise, which did quite as well and was slightly less dangerous.

All the Pennefathers were at home in the garden; so were all the dogs; so were the two Cowley boys. The noise and racket going on when the close-shut black-painted brougham, with its mourning liveries and its coal-black horse, drove up was something deafening. Every one was shouting at the top of his or her voice; and all were shouting at once. Some of the dogs were barking in concert; others were bounding about the lawn and crashing through the bushes in sympathy and participation. Here was the click of a croquet-ball against the mallet; there the ping of a rifle fired at a mark. It was Babel and Bedlam; and Mr. Branscombe covered his ears with his gloved hands as he slightly groaned and shuddered.

"Barbarians and savages!" he muttered, then composed his handsome face to a melancholy smile as one who would not sadden youthful mirth by the intrusion of his own sorrow, yet who could not quite forget the painful fact that his heart was bleeding and that the merriment of ordinary men was not for him.

And with this melancholy smile, lingering like the touch of pale sunlight on his face, he went slowly towards that noisy, laughing, uproarious group gathered on the lawn.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Branscombe," cried Mr. Pennefather, coming forward in his frank, hearty way. "Ah, Stella!—it is good to see you again."

"Dear Stella, this is nice!" said Mrs. Pennefather, kissing her.

They were people who called all the young and even middle-aged of their acquaintance by their Christian names. Well for dignity if they did not hit on a diminutive or some queer nickname which might or might not be pleasant to the wearer!

Mrs. Pennefather, almost as young-looking as her daughters, was one of the standing wonders of maternity in the county. Forty years of age and the mother of seven children, she had the step and figure of a girl and a face

to correspond. She wore neither stays nor cap, nor any sign of matronhood whatsoever save the wedding-ring which marked her state. Her tennis-costume was as short and youthful as Gip's and Pip's; her feet were as small and dainty; and she herself was as light and lissom. It was not from her however, that the children had inherited their beauty and strongly-marked family likeness; but from the father. She herself was fair; and only little Nora, the youngest, carried her impress. The rest were all "father's children," as has been said; inheriting from Mr. Pennefather their dark eyes and curly, jet black hair, their vivid colour and bright, brisk, noisy ways; while from both parents, in equal proportions, came the good digestion, good temper, cleanly living and kindness of heart which made youth perennial in the Pennefather household. They were people who would never grow old in one sense, because they would never grow indolent, self-indulgent, sour-tempered nor envious.

The girls, Gip and Pip, dashed forward too; kissing Stella as soon as their mother had done with her, and greeting her as if she had been their dearest friend. They had this hospitable way to callers; seeming to wish to make their guests free of all that Sherrardine contained, themselves included.

"How are you, dear Stella?" they shouted in their boatswains' voices. "So glad to see you! So jolly of you to come!"

"We thought you were never coming out of your shell again, you jolly little snail!" continued Gip, while Pip stood by and emphasized her sister's words, by running bursts of laughter. "It is ages—heaps of ages since we saw you! And how white you are! What have you been doing to yourself? You look as if you wanted bucketfuls of salt water and oceans of fresh air!"

"Do I?" said Stella, rubbing her cheeks with a quivering little smile that was only the other side of tears.

"Do you? why of course you do! Mater, did you ever see such a poor limp rag, such a ghost as Stella Branscombe looks?" shouted Gip; while Jemmy, who was suspected of being hard hit in this direction, took quite a sentimental expression on his bronzed face as he said:

"Yes, Miss Stella, you look as if you had been shut up in the dark for a twelvemonth. You ought to get out more, I am sure. A good long jolly cruise would do you no end of good!"

"Well, now we've got you here, we won't let you go in a hurry," said Gip and Pip

together. "So come and sit down under the verandah and we'll have a jolly little talk together. Have you heard the news? Mr. Branscombe, have you heard the news?" shouted Pip, raising her voice.

"No," returned Mr. Branscombe stiffly.

These Miss Pennefathers were really extremely rude and objectionable young women, without manners, reverence, respect or breeding! Though glad to show them the last fine product of his genius and not too dainty to garner the coarse harvest of their praise, still, he was out of place and ill at ease in this succursale of Bedlam, and he wished his visit well over.

"No! You have not heard that Sandro Kemp is going to be married? Isn't that fun?" shouted Gip.

"Is it?" replied Mr. Branscombe with cold disdain. "I confess I am unable to see either the interest or the fun of the announcement."

"Oh, I say!" cried Gip and Pip. "It is awful fun, Mr. Branscombe. Quite too good a joke."

As ill-luck would have it, at that moment Colonel Moneypenny appeared on the lawn.

"Isn't it fun, Colonel Moneypenny?" cried the twins in a breath.

"What?" he asked.

"Old Sandro Kemp's marriage," they answered.

The Colonel's keen, irritable face flushed from brow to chin.

"Fun that he has found any one simple enough to take him?" he answered with contempt. "I hardly think it will prove fun for the woman, whoever she may be. Who is she?"

He spoke in an odd voice and with a strained manner, peevishly kicking one of the balls which lay at his feet.

"Well, we did think it was your old flame, Augusta Latrobe," said Gip—dense, pachydermatous, insensitive Gip, who would not have harmed a fly had she known what she was about and who was now doing a friend whom she liked as much damage as it was possible for inconsiderateness and chatter to do. "But she swears it isn't, so we don't know what to think. We caught them on the road however, playing at spoons if ever any one did. But Augusta said no, it wasn't spoons at all, and that old Kemp had only been telling her a secret; and Augusta don't tell lies. Still, it all looked queer; and who else can it be? It can't be any one else, and the old fellow doesn't often go away. Colonel, who can it be?"

"How the deuce should I know? Do you

think I am in the confidence of a fellow like that artist Kemp, or care a button whom he marries?" cried Colonel Moneypenny savagely. As Gip said afterwards: "The old bear snapped her nose off; and all for what, she would like to know?" "Mr. Kemp's affairs do not interest me," he added stiffly, recovering his dignity if not his temper.

"Nor me," said Mr. Branscombe, also stiffly.

"Oh, they do us!" shouted the Pennefathers —about five or six of them in a body. "Old Kemp is a jolly old boy when he is in good form; but he was as sour as vinegar and as cross as two sticks at our picnic. We thought at the time it was because you had taken off Augusta; but now we think it could not have been that. Perhaps his lady-love had not written to him, or perhaps after all it is Augusta!" said Gip—this last in a meditative voice.

"Oh, Stella!" said Pip, taking up the lost thread, "I wish you could have been at our picnic. It was such awful fun—it was just awfully jolly all through! George and I changed hats and brooches, and even the Cowley boys did not find us out. It was such fun. And people came to me for Gip, and went to Gip for me, and made no end of mulls and mistakes."

And here they all laughed in chorus at the exquisite humour of the remembrance.

When the last echoes of their mirth had died away, Gip, who had a talent for blunders of this kind, said so that Mr. Branscombe could hear:

"Stella, they say that you are not going to be married just yet? Is it true? Poor Cyril! What a sell for him! I say, what a shame!"

Stella looked with a scared face to her elegant father who had turned his to this unintentional mischief-maker—the very majesty of indignation impressed on every feature.

"We have our private reasons, Miss Pennefather," he said bitterly; "reasons which perhaps you will be good enough to believe even if you do not understand."

"Oh, reasons are rubbish!" said that impudent little minx, tossing her curly head. "It is a horrid sell and a shame for poor old Cyril all the same; and I was in hopes it was not true. But now you say it is, I am ten times more sorry. What with Sandro Kemp marrying, and not Augusta, after all his spooning her so long, and poor old Cyril Ponsonby not marrying at all, people are very queer!"

"You are skating on thin ice, Gip," said Jemmy in what he thought was a low and

diplomatic voice. It was heard all over the lawn.

"Thin ice? no!" said Gip in return, and in perfect good faith. "Why thin ice, Jem?"

"I tell you you are," replied her brother; and Valentine Cowley, who had been watching the whole scene and taking it all in, said quietly to back up Jem:

"Shut up, Gip, while you can."

Stella saw by her father's face that he too, like Valentine, had been watching and taking it in. She turned pale and looked still more frightened than before.

"Oh, I see," said Gip, in answer to that involuntary telltale face. "Poor Stella! what a shame!"

"No," said Stella heroically; "papa knows best."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Gip quite seriously. "I think if the Governor or Mater put their fingers in my pie I should yell out and tell them to mind their own business. But they wouldn't; they have too much sense. And if they or any one did I don't think I would take it as quietly as you do."

"Shut up, Gip," again said Jemmy who was the most enlightened of the group. The discipline of a man-of-war had done something for

him, and his moony tenderness for Stella did something more. "Don't you see that you are making a mull of things and fouling the rope? I tell you you are skating on thin ice."

"Am I really? Well I'm sure I don't want to," said Gip in Pennefather syntax; and with that she dashed off into a tirade against Mrs. Morshead and her horrid temper, and how sweet Augusta Latrobe was, and how she, Georgie Pennefather, wished that some one would take pity on the poor darling and carry her clean away from that old dragon. Then turning sharp round to Colonel Moneypenny she cried out:

"Why don't you, Colonel Moneypenny? You were always a kind of beau of hers, even before that queer old spidery Professor came on the field."

So good-hearted, bright-eyed Georgie Pennefather managed to do a great deal of practical harm to two people whom she really liked, and to set a stone rolling which would crush more than one tender little plantation before it finally settled at the bottom of the hill.

Soon after this Mr. Branscombe rose to take his leave. He handed Mr. Pennefather a thick packet of his "Threnody." There was one for each of his family, even including the young

Mr. Cowleys and not omitting little Nora. He wished the child always to remember her sainted friend, he said with histrionic solemnity; and he was sure she would prize the gift.

The family made queer faces as they received the cards which he solemnly distributed each to each. They were bound by good manners to look grave while nature impelled them so dreadfully to laugh! Between the two they were in internal convulsions and outward restraint; and more than one nearly split that thin skin of artificial decorum to let out a flood of wicked merriment which would have spoiled all. They managed however, to keep things in trim till the brougham rolled away; and then they pulled up the planks and the waters gushed out without restraint.

"A most objectionable and detestable family," said Mr. Branscombe peevishly, as they went through the gates. "I am thankful that is done with! We need not see them now for another six months! They are really scarcely human, and more like so many Cherokee Indians than like civilized English ladies and gentlemen. They are too dreadful—really they are."

"They are very noisy and indiscreet," answered Stella, seeing that her father looked for some reply. "But they do not mean to be

rude or disagreeable, and they do not know half they say."

"To call them irresponsible idiots, my dear Stella, does not mend matters very much," said Mr. Branscombe. "People who do not know what they say or do are either idiots or maniacs. To which category of disordered brain do you assign the family of the Pennefathers?"

"I did not quite mean that, papa," said Stella with a nervous little laugh.

"No? Are you then following the example of your friends and saying what you do not mean?" he asked unpleasantly.

For her answer Stella stole her hand into his; but after a short time Mr. Branscombe put it away.

"Your hand is hot, my love," he said coldly; "and hot hands are unpleasant."

The visit to Mrs. Morshead was not much less disagreeable to Mr. Branscombe than had been that to the family at Sherrardine. The rough old woman had a genuine horror of Finery Fred's silky manners and artificial nobleness; and spiky as she was to every one, taking a savage pleasure in making herself like a coarse rough bit of huckaback to all satin surfaces, and of meeting affectation and pretentiousness with absolute vulgarity, she was never so

coarse, so vulgar, as when she had to protest against the affectations of the master of Rose Hill.

"The fellow made her quite ill," she used to say with a sneer; "and she was sick of his fine airs!"

To-day she was a Tartar, as usual. What he asserted that she contradicted; what he praised that she condemned; she would not now even agree with him in politics, though they followed the same leaders, but turned aside that she might have the satisfaction of a fling at him with her heavy old heel. She too noticed Stella's pallor, and spoke of it in a manner that made him see she thought it all due to himself; as indeed it was. Which did not however, prevent her snapping at her daughter when the Branscombes had gone and Augusta was lamenting Stella's evident want of tone; saying in her harsh voice:

"Nonsense, Augusta! Do you want the creature to look like a milkmaid when her dear mother is just dead? You have no more feeling than a cat, Augusta! I declare you have not, and not so much," added the old woman, looking fondly at her sleeping Shah.

She too had hard work to receive the Memorial Card with becoming suavity. She

had no desire to laugh outright, like those naughty Pennefathers, but she did long to tell that old fribble, as she mentally called handsome Fred Branscombe, the family Apollo, what washy stuff she thought his poetry was, and what detestable taste it was, first to write it at all, then to print it as it was printed, and finally to distribute it among the neighbours. By a wonderful exercise of self-control she said nothing of all that was seething in her mind; but she received the card with unmistakable ungraciousness, and laid it on the table without looking at it.

"I have seen it. You gave one to my daughter only yesterday," she said curtly.

"For your little grandson," said Mr. Branscombe, gracefully presenting her with another copy.

This was more than the terrible old woman's patience could bear.

"Bless my heart and soul what can a baby make of a thing like that?" she cried. "What can that child understand about spirits and tombs and Cimmerian gloom, I wonder!"

"Still, mamma, we can keep it till he is old enough," said Augusta, knowing how children do prize things which they cannot understand nor yet play with.

"Solemn thoughts do no harm even to the young," said Mr. Branscombe, gracefully as well as mournfully.

"Solemn fiddlesticks!" snapped Mrs. Morshead. "What has an infant like that to do with solemn thoughts? Leave those to old people like you and me, Mr. Branscombe, and let the young enjoy themselves while they can. It is different with such as you and me, with one foot in the grave as one may say, and old enough to know better than spend our time in folly."

She repeated the association of herself with her elegant and well-preserved guest with evident gusto, knowing how it would rasp him to be classed with her, he having still pretensions to be counted in his prime, and she being an old creature who made herself older than she really was by her carelessness of appearances, and by that something, no one knew what, which kept her to her chair for the most part, though sometimes she might be seen walking feebly and painfully in the garden.

"I hope not quite so old as that, dear madam!" said Mr. Branscombe with a sickly smile. "Not quite one foot in the grave yet."

He forgot his promise to Stella.

"As for that, having just lost your dear

wife I should think, Mr. Branscombe, the grave would be the happiest place for you," said Mrs. Morshead gravely. "If you are a Christian, as you should be, you ought to rejoice at the prospect of meeting her again in heaven as soon as God pleases, and not think your death a misfortune."

"Ah! just so, my dear madam; just so!" he sighed rather than said. "By the way, talking of marriages, the Misses Pennefather, my dear Mrs. Latrobe," he continued, turning abruptly to Augusta, "told me that our good friend Mr. Kemp was about to enter the holy state and that you were his confidante. Is it so?"

For a moment the widow's customary self-control deserted her. Not a pale pink flush this time, but a crimson flood poured hotly over the face.

"Did they?" she said as lightly as she could speak. "What girls they are!"

Mrs. Morshead looked at her sharply.

"What is this, Augusta? Sandy Kemp going to be married, and you know all about it? What does all this mean?"

"Nothing, mamma," said Augusta with a smile that vainly tried to make itself look natural. "It is only some nonsense of those wild Pennefather girls."

"So! Where does the mistake lie, my dear Mrs. Latrobe?" repeated Mr. Branscombe slowly; "in the report of our friend's marriage at all?—or in assertion that it is *not* to a fair friend of mine, not a hundred miles from The Laurels? You must look after your fascinating daughter, Mrs. Morshead, if you do not want to lose her for a second time!" he continued with graceful jocularity. "The Misses Pennefather have sharp eyes, and they whispered a thing or two to-day which sounded suspicious, to say the least of it."

"I am not to be held responsible for all the nonsense that Georgie and Pattie Pennefather talk!" said Augusta with cheerful indifference very well put on.

"I advise them not to talk nonsense of any one belonging to me," said Mrs. Morshead grimly, and more slowly than she generally spoke. "And as for my daughter marrying again, she knows what I feel about that too well to dare to do it. I look on a second marriage as no marriage at all; and I think the man or woman who takes another partner with that poor dead thing in the grave waiting for him in the other world, is as bad as if he had two wives or she two husbands at once. No; you have had your turn, and you must keep to it; so I say to all

people who marry. Alive or dead you are in for it now, and you can't go back or make another choice. And Sandro Kemp or any other—my daughter or any man's daughter—I say the same thing. A second marriage is:—I won't say the word clean out and an unmarried girl like that Stella sitting there."

"You are severe but sublime," said Mr. Branscombe. "I quite agree with you. It is, as you say, the loftiest morality, the purest philosophy."

"I said nothing half so fine," said Mrs. Morshead sourly. "I only said I thought a second marriage a sin. And though my daughter may not be a lump of perfection all through she is a good and modest young woman, and wouldn't commit that sin. That's all, Mr. Branscombe."

"I would not like to wager *all* my fortune on the event," said Mr. Branscombe, still jocular and elegant.

But the terrible old woman's temper could bear no more, and she "flew," as the servants called it, and left the master of Rose Hill with not a metaphorical rag to his back.

Decidedly these two visits had not been successful outlays of time and dignity; and Mr. Branscombe repented of his condescension,

and was angry with Stella, himself and the whole world, for the annoyance to which he had been subjected. He was very peevish and uncomfortable in the brougham, as he drove from The Laurels to Derwent Lodge; but when once there he allowed himself to be soothed by Hortensia's delicate appreciation, as he called her silly craze for himself, while Stella was made happy by a long, long talk with Randolph, all about Cyril and his multiplicity of virtues, his noble character, his fine intellect, his sweet temper and his superiority to ordinary human nature in general.

Meanwhile the stone set rolling by those Miss Pennefathers was crashing at a rapid pace down-hill at The Laurels, giving poor Augusta yet more trouble in her life, where, as things were and even when at their best, she had so few sunny places and so many thorny tracts!

CHAPTER V.

THE GATHERING OF THE STORM.

Sitting always at home, harvesting the gossip of the place through the gleaning of her maid and the scattered grain of chance visitors, it was hard to say which was the more remarkable—Mrs. Morshead's sharpness of penetration or her boldness of imagination. Give her but the corner of a brick and she would build the whole temple; show her but one little bone and she would construct the entire skeleton, and clothe it with fur or feathers as positively as if she had met the creature leaping in the woods or had seen it fly across the sky. She was the centre of all the gossip that floated through Highwood as it floats through every small community; and had it not been for her the social strand would not have been strewed

with half that cruel wreckage of repute for which the little place was famous.

And sitting thus at home, ever pondering and piecing, exaggerating and deducing, while she knitted her shawls and set the heels of her coarse black woollen stockings, she went back again and again on that deep blush which had come into Augusta's face at the mention of Sandro Kemp's probable marriage, and asked herself till she was weary : What did it mean ? Was there any nonsense—nonsense ? worse than that !—between them ? Was Augusta not only thinking of making a fool of herself for the second time, but meditating what Mrs. Morshead believed to be an actual and positive sin ? If she were, then her mother knew what she would do. She would cut off her and her little son with the traditional shilling, and she would leave the whole of her fortune to those three Humane Societies for which she had most sympathy. Emphatically and literally she would take the children's bread and cast it to the dogs. And in the disordered mirror of her own crooked conscience it seemed to her that this would be a holy and a righteous thing to do.

But she would not be rash. She would not act without good reason and full knowledge. So much sense of justice and fear of evil held

her hand. She would watch and see, and if convinced then she would strike. Second marriages were to her, as we know, primal follies translated into sins. She thought them virtually bigamous and held that they should be made illegal, and punished as severely as if the dead and eternally departed were only in the next street and might come back any day to claim their own again. She thought marriage altogether a mistake—her husband had found it a torture — and rivalled Hortensia Lyon herself in her contempt for girls who wanted to be wives. And she despised maternity as martyrdom doing no good to any one. Giving life to a human being brought no joy to the giver, according to her, and conferred no boon on the recipient. She excused the first because of ignorance, but she held the second to be an offence against wisdom if not decency. It would have taken a very brilliant offer of marriage indeed to have reconciled her to Augusta's wifehood even in the first instance; for Mrs. Morshead, of The Laurels, was a woman whose social ambition was wholly satisfied and whose desires did not go beyond her possessions. She had all that she cared to have —local position, a good income, a nice house and fine garden—and she could leave what she

had where she chose. So that her daughter had no need to marry, either in the first instance or the second. But if she, the mother, had condoned the folly of that first—after a struggle and when the bitter retribution had come—she would never forgive the sin of the second. Had a man of birth and standing offered for Augusta she would have asked him sarcastically: What did her daughter want more than she had and would have? When it came to an artist fellow like Sandy Kemp—a man without a penny and whose stake in the county was represented by zero—she was simply furious, and on all sides alike. For if it were not true, it was an insult for which those who had offered it should be made to suffer; and if it were true, then would she discard for ever that shameful girl of hers, and teach her how to disgrace herself again in even a worse manner than she had already.

Still, she would watch and see. But watching and seeing with Mrs. Morshead did not include the patience of silence, the quiet following up of "stalking." It meant perpetual probing and pricking, perpetual hurrying from place to place in search of those cock-a-trice eggs which the Pennefather girls and Mr. Branscombe had said were hatching.

Quite suddenly, without the slightest warning and breaking a dead silence between them, she would ask: "When did you last see your dear friend, Sandy Kemp, the sign-painter, Augusta?" or: "When is your friend Sandy going to bring his wife home, Augusta? She cannot be much of a thing to marry him, I should say; but whatever she is, I suppose you will be her bosom-friend, seeing that you are the chosen confidante of that fellow."

One day she said, in the same sudden way, and with a curious mixture of passion and grimness:

"Answer me truly, Augusta—and look at me when you speak—has that pauper, Sandy Kemp, had the impudence to make love to you? He must have done so for all these disgraceful reports to have got about. If I had not known better, unfortunately, I should have said you were no child of mine, Augusta. A young woman like you, with a dear little son to educate and think of, and after having made such a shameful marriage as you did, to be left a beggar on the face of the earth but for me, to be carrying on an intrigue with a fellow like that Sandy Kemp! It is enough to make your poor father turn in his grave; and it makes me inclined to disown you as you sit there, so

wooden and indifferent that I long to shake you to see if I could not shake some life into you! If it were not for your little boy I would disinherit you to-night. I declare I would!"

"You are making yourself very uncomfortable, mamma, all for nothing," Augusta answered tranquilly; as she had already answered the same thing in substance, twenty times at the least. "The Pennefather girls are such wild creatures they never think of what they say or do. Else I am sure they would not have said anything to give me pain or do me harm, if they had thought of it. But they just dash out with anything that comes into their heads, not remembering that every one is not so good-natured and free from spite as their own heedless selves."

"You think you are getting out of your scrape very cleverly," said Mrs. Morshead; "but you do not get over me so easily as that, Augusta! I know what I know, and I see what I see; and I am only biding my time—that I can assure you of."

"Very well, mamma," she answered quietly. "If you are determined to see what does not exist, and to make yourself and me unhappy over a few foolish words which mean absolutely nothing, I cannot help it. I can do no differ-

ently from what I have done, for I have done nothing wrong—and there I must leave it."

"And there you will just not leave it," said Mrs. Morshead angrily. "If you think you are going scot-free like this, you are very much mistaken. I mean to search the thing to the bottom, whatever comes of it. And if I find—what I hope I shall not and fear I shall—then let you and that boy of yours look out! Do you imagine for one single instant that I am going to harbour you here in my house that you may carry on a secret intrigue with Mr. Sandro Kemp? No! not if I know it! not if I have to die for it, Augusta!"

By which it may be seen how fully Mr. Branscombe had revenged himself on that unlucky Critic of Pure Reason who would not say that his poetry was sublime, and who wanted to detach Stella from her high-toned duties and lead her into the dissipation and indelicacy of a walk across the fields during the second month of her mourning.

Mr. Branscombe was not the only person who, having a sore feeling against Augusta Latrobe, was not unwilling to do her an ill-turn. That luckless chatter about the artist's problematical confidence of love for another and shrewdly suspected love-making on his account,

had raised up for the poor young widow even a more formidable enemy than the shallow-natured master of Rose Hill; and Colonel Moneypenny, crisped and crimped through jealousy, came up to The Laurels to add his little vial of wrath to those already broken over her head. This sweet-tempered and reasonable creature's virtue of patience and self-control, fate had determined should not rust for want of sufficient exercise!

If Mrs. Morshead could be said to have a favourite in this wicked world of men, it was Colonel Moneypenny—in whom she admired all but his name; and that she forgave. There was much about him that exactly suited her tastes; and she thought if all men were more like him, things would go a little better than they did now. He was clean, well-set up and smooth shaven, save for his military moustache—which became him as a man and was the sign of his estate. He wore his grizzled hair cut as close as a brush, not hanging over his ears like that artist fellow Sandy Kemp, nor elaborately curled and trimmed like that old fop Mr. Branscombe. He was always well dressed, as a gentleman in the country should be; his gloves were clean; his boots without a speck of mud on them; and he never brought in with

him a trace of the weather out of doors, whether it were windy, rainy, dusty, or what not. How he managed to look always so perfectly clean and unruffled no one could find out; but he did; and Mrs. Morshead counted it to him for virtue.

Then, he was bitter in thought and sharp in speech; a cynic and a pessimist, equalling herself in universal disdain for all humanity and superior to herself in the method of setting forth his views. They held too, the same political opinions, founded on the short and easy way of permanent opposition. Whoever was in office was more or less a scoundrel; and every measure that was passed was one nail the more in the coffin of national prosperity and honour. Belief in good reasons, whereof they did not see the whole bulk, was a stretch of faith which they derided as credulity; but they gave each man in power credit for every evil motive that could disgrace a citizen or discredit a politician. They were independent thinkers, they said, when reminded that they called themselves Liberals; and they held themselves exempt from all allegiance to the party to which they said they belonged. In fact they called themselves Liberals that they might righteously vilify the Conservatives, yet not

be compelled to hold with any section of a party composed of so many different shades as is that of Liberalism. It gave them a wider field for universal opposition than else they would have had and opened endless avenues for proving themselves superior to their titular comrades in judgment, patriotism, and sometimes in true liberality. In a word they were the two Pessimists, the two Irreconcilables of Highwood. And as Mrs. Morshead always agreed with the Colonel and the Colonel always sent everything to the deuce, they were in perfect accord; and Colonel Moneypenny had more than once been heard to say that he did not see what people had against Mrs. Morshead—he had always found her perfectly easy to get on with and a remarkably intelligent old woman. He knew better; but Mrs. Morshead did as well as anything else for a cause of contradiction to the majority. And to defend one so universally dreaded and disliked gave him an air of generosity which gratified himself if it convinced no one else.

But if he found her easy to get on with when both put their horses' heads together and charged against all before them, he had not yet tried her with making love to her daughter. And by the look of things he was not likely

to try her very soon in that direction. Stung by jealousy, piqued in his self-love, his pride of position outraged by the intrusion of a mere artist on reserved ground where he had set up his own fine military flag, feeling himself insulted in that any one could possibly couple the name of the woman whom secretly he loved with that of any other man—and that other Sandro Kemp—Colonel Moneypenny believed that he had driven Augusta Latrobe out of his heart for ever, and burnt the last traces of her image in the fire of his unforgiving wrath. He was sure that now he both bitterly despised and actively hated her; and he was also sure that he had never really loved her. It had been a mere passing fancy born of compassion more than anything else. He knew that she had a hard life with that old wolf, her mother —the woman whom he defended with his bitter smile and sarcastic allusions when her sins against the world had come more prominently to the front than usual, and had done more than ordinary harm. He knew that the poor thing, the old wolf's daughter, had not a penny-piece of her own and that her mother made her life of dependence more humiliating than public pauperism would have been. And he had pitied her. As a man and a gentleman he

could do no less. Yes; he had certainly pitied her; and had she been wise he might have been foolish. But his guardian angel had joined hands with her bad genius to protect him; and "quem Deus vult perdere" was the text on which had been written the theme of her destruction and his own salvation.

When therefore he decided on going to Mrs. Morshead to add his vial to those already broken over that peccant head, no ruth for coming pain through his cruelty disturbed his mind, burning as it was with the egoist's flaming fire of humiliated vanity. He had been wounded in those secret recesses of a man's pride where wounds fester and never heal; and Augusta Latrobe had to learn to her cost what it was to slight a man who might have been more than a friend, and whom now, by her imprudence, she had made into something worse than a foe.

So, full of bitter thoughts and harsh intent, his anger high, his pride in arms, he called at The Laurels—and found both Mrs. Morshead and her daughter at home.

Almost as soon as he entered Augusta knew that a bad quarter of an hour was before her. She saw it in the fiery eyes which just glanced at her for an instant, then turned themselves

away almost with a jerk as if they had seen what was unpleasant;—she saw it in the restless lips which seemed as if they could scarcely contain till the fitting moment that flood of bitterness which was working in his soul, longing to pour itself out and overwhelm her with shame;—she felt it in the very touch of his hand, not limp and nerveless with indifference, but taking hers with the hasty touch and sharp withdrawal of an irritation that was almost as uncontrollable as a flame of fire;—yes, she saw it all; and, with that quiet strength which was her characteristic, she prepared to meet with wisdom what she could not avert by courage and to bend under the storm which she could not disperse by resistance.

For a time the conversation flowed tranquilly over safe places. True, it was always full of acidity and condemnation; but it did no one any harm if Mrs. Morshead fell foul of the Prime Minister and the Government, and Colonel Moneypenny followed suit with objurgations against the Leader of the Opposition—if one prescribed the guillotine for Gambetta and the other a lunatic asylum for the Count de Chambord—and so on through the arid wastes of general politics. The waters might be poisoned from source to outfall, but they did

no harm to living creature; and Augusta bided her time, knowing full well that this was only the flourish of appearances and that the real meaning of her old admirer's visit had to come.

And in time it did come; as she knew it would.

When the Colonel had delivered himself of his last political sentiment, which was something to the effect that the Turks should be sent out of Europe and the Russian Empire dismembered, he turned sharply round to Mrs. Latrobe—his fiery eyes ablaze, his thin lips lifted at the corners and crisped into the very embodiment of scorn—saying suddenly:

"I hear that I have to congratulate you, Mrs. Latrobe; rather I should say I have to congratulate Mr. Kemp."

Mrs. Morshead sat bolt upright in her chair, glaring savagely from under her heavy eyebrows. The name of Sandro Kemp, never pleasant to her ears, had by now become the very match to the powder-store, and her anger, never difficult to rouse, blazed out heaven-high at the mention of this man whom she hated yet was forced to respect.

"Yes?" answered Augusta with the most benign air of tranquil indifference. "On what?"

"Oh! that is too strong!" said Colonel

Moneypenny in a voice which made the widow almost start, it was so roughened by passion, so strangled and choked by bitterness. "A lady who is engaged to a man asking quietly on what her fiancé has to be congratulated—that is drawing with rather too fine a line, Mrs. Latrobe!"

"Perhaps it would be if there was any line to draw at all," she answered. "But in this case your picture is in the clouds. I was not aware till now that I was engaged to Mr. Kemp."

"Who has put this lie about?" asked Mrs. Morshead harshly. "Who is your authority, Colonel Moneypenny, for such a disgraceful statement?"

"Oh! the whole place is talking of it," he answered carelessly. "It is not one person more than another. It is every one."

"One of the Highwood romances?" said Augusta with that kind of good-humour which is held to presuppose indifference. "What foolish things people say here! How far better it would be if they had something of public interest to occupy them—then they would leave their neighbours alone."

"It would be better if the neighbours gave no cause for talk," said the Colonel significantly.

"Cause does not come into the question," the young widow answered smiling. "As for cause of gossip on my account—with Mr. Kemp or any other—there is not so much as would warrant the faintest whisper. It is just one of those queer things which happen here—a report got up no one knows how or why."

"You speak with strange confidence, Mrs. Latrobe," said the Colonel with a sneer.

"Strange?" she repeated laughing. "Well, really, Colonel Moneypenny, I think I ought to know best in such a matter! If I am not confident who should be?"

"But I want to know who has set this thing afloat," said Mrs. Morshead, sticking to her point. "Where did you first hear it, Colonel Moneypenny?"

"Where first?" He seemed to ponder. "Well, you see, Mrs. Morshead, I have heard it so often I am not prepared to say where first. I am quite unable to remember. It might have been at Sherrardine. I will not say so positively, but it might have been. I half think, indeed, that it was."

"Then I shall do one of two things," said Mrs. Morshead; "either bring those Pennefathers to book and make them give up their authority, or forbid Mr. Kemp my house. I

will not have such things said of any daughter of mine. She has only me to look to for protection and support, and I will get to the bottom of this. I swear I will."

"Yes, madam, do," said Colonel Moneypenny with emphasis and a cruel look to Augusta.

"If you can," said Augusta. "But that will just be the difficulty. How can you get to the foundation of things which do not exist?"

"It is as well to try," said the Colonel dryly.

"You may try to make ropes out of sea-sand, but I fancy you would lose your time," said Augusta with a smile. "There is nothing here to find out. I can say no more."

"Then I have your authority for saying that nothing of a tender nature"—with what a sneer he said these words!—"exists between you and Mr. Kemp, have I?" asked the Colonel, addressing Augusta.

"Certainly you have," she answered, raising her clear and candid eyes into his face. They were almost too clear, too candid, too demonstratively innocent to please him. The merest trifle of waver and shyness would have seemed more natural. And why were her cheeks so deeply dyed?—she whose warmest blush was in general rather a reflection than a blush which had mounted of itself.

"And you may add from me that Sandro Kemp never enters these doors again!" said Mrs. Morshead viciously.

Again Colonel Moneypenny looked at the young widow. How would she take this last sentence? Would it be a blow to her? a wound? a shock? He looked and saw absolutely nothing. The fair face remained as still as if it had been a mask. Not a line, not a curve shifted its place; not the faintest quiver of the eyelid, of the lip, marked the least ruffle of the feelings. Only her colour suddenly paled from that feverish brightness to dead pure white; and then the blood rushed back in a burning stream which defied concealment. She was brave truly, but she was not what she assumed to be indifferent.

"It is the best thing you can do for your daughter," said Colonel Moneypenny, still watching her. "In her position it is necessary to be even more careful than with other ladies. I am glad now that I have been the means of enabling you to act according to your usual vigorous judgment, Mrs. Morshead. As you say, if you do not wish the report to take root it must be checked in the beginning."

"It shall be," said Mrs. Morshead, she also watching her daughter.

On this came a profound silence, during which the mother and the man, who from a lover had become an enemy, both watched the young woman as she sat there searching quietly for something in her workbox. Then, as if the prolonged silence struck on her ears as meaning their waiting her response, she looked up with eyes which were still almost too clear and fixed and candid, and said in a quite natural but somewhat monotonous voice :

"Do as you think best, mamma. It is all a matter of indifference to me."

"She is impenetrable!" said the Colonel to himself. "Old Nick himself could not fathom her! But in any case I have put a spoke in that fellow's wheel and spoiled his fun for a time! It shall never be said that Sandro Kemp and I were rivals for any woman's favour, and that he stole a march on me where I was fancying myself secure!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAUNCHING OF THE BOLT.

"WRITE exactly as I tell you, Augusta, else it will be the worse for you."

The terrible old woman was sitting stiff, upright and square for action in the dull green chair which was specially hers. Her widow's cap was well forward on her head; the sure sign with her of a rather worse state of temper than was even usual, and, as we know, that state was never good. Her black Shetland shawl was folded closely round her shoulders, her black silk mittens came lower than ever over her fingers. By her side slept her favourite cat on his luxurious crimson velvet cushion; in her hand she held one of those eternal coarse black woollen stockings, to knit which, with alternations of shawls, for the poor, made the sole occupation of her life.

Augusta sat by the writing-table in the bay of the window. Paper and ink were before her and the pen was in her hand. She was writing to Sandro Kemp, according to the dictation of her mother, a letter which was to end all the gossip about her and him, because ending their acquaintance not to speak of their friendship.

It was a hard task; but she knew that she had nothing for it but to obey. Her mother represented the tyranny of circumstances and the irresistible power of fate; and Augusta was no stronger than Prometheus had been in his day, than Eurydice had been in hers.

"Are you ready, Augusta?" then said Mrs. Morshead, watching her daughter as she quietly arranged her materials.

"Yes, mamma," she answered in a perfectly unmoved voice.

Not that her quiet acquiescence contented the mother any more than the candour of her eyes had contented Colonel Moneypenny. It was almost too complete—too well done. Had there been a little sign of feeling, or annoyance, even of opposition, both would have felt more satisfied. They would then, at least, have had the pleasure of victory; whereas now the walls had fallen down at the first blast of the

trumpet; and when the fighting blood is up and the blow struck, it gives a tremendous sense of disappointment and checked energies to strike against a bunch of feathers which neither resist nor return.

"Say then, 'Sir,'" began Mrs. Morshead. "Don't you put 'Dear Sir:—do you hear, Augusta? Say simply 'Sir:'—'Sir: I have to request that you will henceforth discontinue your visits to my mother and myself.' Put 'my mother' too, else the impudent fellow will be coming here to ask me for an explanation on pretence that I am not you; 'to my mother and myself,'" she repeated. "'And that you will not presume'—have you put 'presume,' Augusta?"

"Yes, mamma," she answered, her face flooded with that same kind of deep flush which had been on it yesterday, but else as still as a painted doll's.

"'That you will not presume to address me when we next meet,'" continued the old woman. "'I refuse beforehand to give any explanation of the step which self-respect compels me to take. Augusta Latrobe.' Now, Augusta, have you written it all out as I have dictated?" she asked very sharply. "Word for word exactly as I said?"

"Yes, mamma," her daughter answered.

"Let me see it," said Mrs. Morshead. "You are too slippery for me, Augusta; I cannot trust you."

"You have no right to say that, mamma," cried her daughter, firing up with a strange feeling of relief at being able to fire up legitimately about something, no matter what. "Where have you found me slippery and untrustworthy? It is too bad of you to say such a thing to me!"

"Don't speak to me like that," cried Mrs. Morshead angrily; "I will not submit to be spoken to by my own child in that insolent way! You are slippery; and so I tell you; and you are not to be trusted, for all your appearance of obedience. And for all I know, if I did not look sharp after you, you would put in a private note to that Sandy Kemp of yours, and tell him you were made to write like this, and that you were his affectionate sweetheart all through. It would not be the first time that you had deceived me; nor are you the only young gipsy who has pretended one thing to her parents and done the exact contrary to her lover!"

"Oh, mamma, how can you spoil yourself and make every one unhappy about you by

this dreadful and unjust suspicion," cried Augusta in passionate indignation.

Her philosophy was scattered to the winds; and her patience broke down under the combined strain of this heavy task and undeserved insult. She could have accomplished that bitter act of renunciation, even by such a method, had her mother left her in peace for the rest. But together the two things were beyond her, and she lost her self-restraint as one loses one's cloak in a sudden storm.

"If I make every one so unhappy about me, Augusta, you and your boy had better find another home where you will be happier," said Mrs. Morshead slowly.

Rash words rose to the young widow's lips, like flames leaping under battened hatches. Her calm, clear eyes shone with an angry light which Mrs. Morshead had seen in them only once before;—and that was on a certain morning when they had had a serious quarrel over some perfectly insignificant trifle—the morning of that day in the afternoon of which Augusta had come back from a walk in the fields to say that she had accepted Mr. Latrobe, and would be married to him in six weeks from that date. Never before nor since had the same look come into her face, the same light shone and flamed

in her eyes, until now. She stood, her back to the writing-table where she had just been sitting, transcribing this cruel letter to the man who loved her and whom she loved though she would not permit herself confession. One hand was on the table, the other was on the frill and brooch at her throat. Her heart beat as if it would break through the bars which held it in; her lips, which had been so tightly set, half unclosed themselves as if to speak; her bright eyes flashed and flamed;—when the voice of her little son came on her ears as he ran past the window on the lawn. She saw him as he ran, chasing a peacock-butterfly which was always just going to be caught and never was—his fair hair flying in the wind and his happy little face all aglow with health and childish joy. In one swift moment came visions of his misery and confinement in stifling lodgings, while she went out on her dull, ill-paid tasks whereby to get him daily bread. She measured his loss in health, in development, in education, in social standing, in future ease and sufficiency, as the price paid for her ungoverned passion, her rash irrevocable words. She saw it as if it had been a picture flashed by the sunlight before her eyes; and perhaps his death as the end of all, because she would not bear her cross with patience.

Her hand tightened on the table and her slender fingers seemed to dig themselves into her throat. Her eyes dropped to the floor and her common-sense, her reasonableness, her self-control, her power of cheerful self-surrender to the inevitable came down on her dangerous mood like the door of an iron cage where wild beasts are kept. She must yield again as so often before, where fighting would do no good but only make things worse for her and ruinous for her boy. Yet, not for herself. Had she been alone she would have flung up all—home, station, inheritance—all, as she had done once before. But now she was not alone. She had her boy; and she owed herself first to him.

"You know, mamma," she said as quietly as she could speak; "I do sincerely try to please you, and you know that I obey you."

"You obey me, yes, in a way," said Mrs. Morshead, looking at her from under her eyebrows; "but it is in a way I do not like, Augusta. You always seem to have something behindhand, as it were. You give nothing but the bare bones of obedience. You do as I tell you because you cannot help yourself, but you do not do it sincerely—you do not do it with your mind. It is only lip-service when all is said and done. You keep your real

thoughts to yourself, and I don't like that. I would rather you came out with things straight to my face, than think one thing and do another."

"If I do as you wish, it is scarcely fair to accuse my thoughts," said Augusta. "And I do not think you would like it if I were to oppose you," she added.

"Then I tell you I would," said Mrs. Morshead angrily. "How dare you say I would not when I say I would? You are a most undutiful and contradictious girl, Augusta. I will not have you give me the lie like this!"

And Augusta resisted the temptation of that logical demonstration lying ready-made to her hand.

"At least believe," she said quietly, "that I do really wish to please you, mamma, and that if I fail it is not for want of trying."

The old woman saw her advantage. The foil was lowered and her opponent had placed herself at her mercy. No passion was so strong with Mrs. Morshead as the love of power; and she had none of that generosity which accepts surrender magnanimously and forbears to press the fallen.

"Yes," she answered grimly; "I will give you credit for so much common sense, Augusta.

You know when you are well off and which side your bread is buttered. And it is perhaps just as well that you know too when to give in A little more of your ingratitude and impertinence, and there would have been an end to everything, I can assure you. You might have gone where you would for that dear child's next velvet suit. He would not have got it from me. I am not used to be spoken to in that manner; and what is more, I do not intend to get used to it."

"I am sorry if I offended you, mamma," said Augusta, as quietly as she had spoken just a moment since, seating herself again at the table to address the envelope which was to contain that cruel and insulting letter.

"It is all very well to get out of things in that cool way," said Mrs. Morshead. "You are cool, I must say that for you, Augusta! Any other girl would have been down on her knees to her mother after she had insulted her as you have just insulted me. But you toss your head and say 'I am sorry,' as indifferently as if you had been speaking to the cat. And then you think you have done all you ought and all that need be done."

"Well, mamma, I will go down on my knees and say I am *very* sorry," said her daughter

pleasantly, going up to her mother and placing herself on her knees, while she caressingly took the disengaged hand lying at that moment idly on the arm of the easy chair.

But Mrs. Morshead drew it away with a jerk.

"Don't be silly, Augusta!" she said snappishly. "Get off your knees this instant, I tell you, and send that impudent fellow his letter."

Augusta obeyed, and did not even sigh. Her mother had truly the power to rouse her temper, sweet and equable as this was; but she could not wound her heart. Affections which are constantly chilled, repelled and refused, end at last by dying down to the roots, like vines which are too much pruned. The roots are there and the vine is not dead in its entirety; but all the grace of foliage and sweetness of fruitage have been cut away, at least for the immediate present and this year's vintage.

She went back to the table to direct the envelope. She placed in it the letter—resisting the temptation that came upon her with almost overwhelming power—of slipping in a word already written: "This is not my own." But of what use to refrain from that which would kill all lingering feeling of tenderness and so destroy for ever this pleasant dream, this streak of moonlight shining like silver in the dark?

It would be a sharp pain to him; and he would despise and hate her. She would be sorry that he should; yet, why not? Their friendship could not bring them happiness, but the contrary. It kept alive delusive and unwise hopes in him; it stood in the way of her peace at home; and if in the way of her peace, then in that of her boy's best interests. No. It was hard; but it was the best thing to do. The note must go as her mother had dictated and she had transcribed, without a word of explanation or disclaimer. She was so much the poorer, but her boy's interests were just so much the more assured.

Suddenly she was recalled to the fact that she had not written the envelope by her mother's harsh voice.

"When you have done staring at that piece of paper, Augusta, as if you had never seen an envelope before, or were looking through it and the table and everything into the centre of the earth, perhaps you will write that fellow's name so that Page can read it. He shall take it this afternoon, when he goes that way for dahlias."

Her mother's voice was harsh indeed. It made the young widow start as if a pistol had been fired at her back.

"I was dreaming," she said; "and had forgotten all about Mr. Kemp."

"Oh! had you?" returned Mrs. Morshead dryly. "Glad to hear it, Augusta. But it would be more to the purpose perhaps if you would condescend to remember him just enough to direct that letter and let it go with Page this afternoon."

Without another word Augusta took her pen, wrote the address in her large flowing hand, fastened down the fly of the envelope, then held the letter to her mother.

"Shall I ring the bell, mamma, and send it out to Page?" she said.

"No," said Mrs. Morshead shortly. "I will see my own servants myself."

"I must go and call Tony, then," said Augusta. "It is getting time for his reading-lesson."

She felt suffocated and strangled, as if in another moment she must cry out or burst into tears. It took all her self-control to keep down the hysterical passion that strove so hard to get the upper hand of reason and good sense. A breath of fresh air, a loving caress from her little son would do her good. She wanted to have the child in her arms, to look into his sweet face, to see his bright eyes and hear

his merry voice. She wanted to be able to hold him to her heart and whisper to him fondly: "It is all for you, my boy. Tell me that you love me—I who love you so well!"

As she stood up to go something almost as dark as a physical shadow crossed the old woman's face. She looked up sharply with her small fierce eyes set so deeply under those thick overhanging brows which gave her such a sinister expression.

"You will please to stay where you are, Augusta," she said in her hard imperative way. "I do not want you to have a private talk with Page, and all sorts of tender messages sent to that fellow, and perhaps the letter not sent at all. No; sit down again I say and let that poor child have an extra hour's play this beautiful day. The way you hound him to his lesons is quite inhuman. Do you want him to be an infant phenomenon at seven and an idiot at seventeen? That is what you will make of him if you force him as you do."

Augusta turned one swift glance on her mother, but she said no more. The yoke was on her neck and she had to bend to it; light or heavy she had in good truth to bend to it and make the best of the weary load she was doomed to draw!

Something in her face touched the old woman's shallow spring of pity. After all the girl had done as she was bidden without complaint; and though there was something about her that her mother could neither fathom nor understand—something that she felt she did not get hold of—still, she had no open cause to suspect or find fault with her. She had been a very undutiful and wicked creature to marry that penniless Professor, and then to let him die so that she had to come back here with that tiresome boy of hers—but what was done could not be undone, and there was no good in harking back over the past, thought Mrs. Morshead, with a sudden and rare accession of good sense. She did nothing now that she ought not; and on the whole—despite that inner something which escaped her, the mother, that spiritual freedom and selfhood which she would not give up but which she only held and did not fight for—she was as good as could be expected after four years of marriage with such a man as that Professor. And thinking all this, and watching her daughter's patient face, the organ which stood for a heart with Mrs. Morshead relented, and she said brusquely:

"Go and call that little monkey of yours, if you like, Augusta. I dare say Page is at his

dinner. Perhaps you do not mean to deceive me."

"When will you believe, mamma, that I never deceive you?" she asked quietly. "I do not think I could teach my child his prayers if I were living in an atmosphere of deception."

"Well, child, perhaps you could not," said her mother. "Still I don't know quite all about everything," she added, going back to her normal attitude of suspicion as if she had suddenly broken a spring. "All this mish-mash about Sandy Kemp must have had some foundation."

"It has none, mamma," answered Augusta firmly. "It has sprung only from girlish nonsense. Mr. Branscombe and Colonel Moneypenny have made up the whole seriousness of the thing. It is no other person's doing."

"There! say no more about it, for goodness' sake," said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "I am sick to death of that impudent fellow's name. You are always talking of him, Augusta. It is quite tiresome—I declare it is. And go and find that boy of yours. Is he to grow up a dunce for your neglect? At his age he ought to be at school and in Latin. And he cannot read words of four letters. The child is a regular dunce! I am ashamed to call him my grandson!"

"I do verily believe mamma is getting softening of the brain and going out of her mind," thought Augusta to herself as she went into the garden for her boy. "Her temper never was so persistently bad as it is now. There used to be gleams of amiability in poor papa's time; but now her love of contradiction and her suspicion are really more like insanity than anything else."

Just so; but then nothing is so like insanity as that kind of ill-temper which puts itself in opposition to all the world; and the man who thinks no one in the right but himself is, for all the practical purposes of moral life, as insane as if he had crowned himself with straw and called himself Emperor in Bedlam.

"All the same I will take care that Page does leave this note and that Augusta does not see him," said Mrs. Morshead to herself, ringing the bell sharply. "She does as I tell her, I know, and she seems to be all fair and above-board, but there is something—I do not know what it is—but I feel and know that it is there. She gives in to me because she cannot help herself; but she only obeys—she does not really submit."

And so far the terrible old woman was right.

Sandro had just finished his luncheon when

Mrs. Prinsep brought a letter from The Laurels. He recognized the handwriting at once, and a boyish thrill of pleasure flushed his face and brightened his eyes as he took the note in his hands and felt almost as if he had heard the soft voice of the fair woman speak to him—as if he had seen her dear eyes look at him.

"She is a darling!" he said half aloud. "The one perfect woman in the world!"

Then he opened the letter and read what Augusta had written. He could not make it out. The words ran into each other so that he could scarcely see them even as mere symbols; while the sense was so hopelessly confused he could not understand the meaning when he made out the words. It was as if he had been suddenly struck blind, or as if his mind had given way. An awful terror of madness, of imbecility, came over him, and made him tremble like a frightened girl. He read words which had no sense in them—was she mad or he? Then he laid the letter down and thought over its meaning, trying to make it clear to himself. What had he done to offend her? The last time they had met they had been good friends—quite good friends, and almost something more. It could not have been then. Yet if not then, when was it? The whole thing was a tangle,

a maze, a huge distortion wherein he saw nothing clear nor straight. But through it all burnt the one ineffaceable line—"that you will not presume to address me when next we meet." No explanations could soften that command—no tears wash out those hard words. The sweet and tender friendship which had been such a solace to him was at an end; and henceforth he was not even to speak to her when he met her. All hope was over. What had life left for him?

He felt that it had nothing left. No fame, no work, no sun, no joy. The woman whom he loved and whose love he had had it ever in his hope to gain when the clouds should have lifted from his path—that woman had taken herself from him even in the simple way of friendship. His star was set; his day was over. Why should he drag through the weary hours of the long, unbroken night?

Scarcely knowing what he did, and only conscious of the desire to escape he neither knew nor cared where, he crushed the note in his hand and rang the bell for his landlady.

"Mrs. Prinsep," he said in a constrained voice; "I am going up to London to-day. Can you pack my bag?"

"Yes, sir," she answered; but she looked at him curiously as she spoke.

Something had gone amiss, she did not know what, only it was something very greatly amiss; and it came on the receipt of that letter from The Laurels. He had smiled when she had taken it in; there was not much smiling left in him now!

"Good patience!" she thought as she went upstairs to pack his bag; "he has surely never proposed to Mrs. Latrobe and she given him back a No! But it looks like it, poor dear. How could she have had the heart? Why our Mr. Kemp is miles better than that old Latrobe she was so mad about. Well! I would not give much for her taste," was her last commentary as she got her lodger's things together and made him ready for his sudden journey.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LAST APPEAL.

It might be Stella's duty to obey her father's will, but it was not Cyril Ponsonby's to heed Mr. Branscombe's whim. The angle at which each stood made all the difference in their point of view; and their point of view determined their principles of action. It was a duel between the two men such as has been many times in the world before and will be many times again —a duel between the old and the young, inherited duty and acquired love, the father who demanded and the lover who desired—with the poor girl's heart as the battle-ground on which they fought—her life the prize for which they strove.

While saying to himself, generously enough, that his Love only more and more proved the sweet grace of her character by the sacrifice

which she had made, Cyril was none the less determined to do his utmost to convince her that this sacrifice was all wrong, and that her highest duty lay in keeping her word and marrying him before he left for India. This was only natural. The man who would give up his love at the first summons to surrender by another—be that other father or rival—would not have much to give up; and Cyril did love Stella with all the fervour of a young man's passion, all the devotion of a faithful heart. What else then could he do but try to prove to her that this noble sense of filial obedience, for which he honoured her, was all a mistake and wholly wrong and that her highest virtue was to give herself to him? This was the logic of love if not of reason; but love was master of the situation, and reason was pressed into his service as his henchman.

By the tone of her letters, sadder and sadder, more hopeless and more pathetic in their resignation to inevitable sorrow, as the days went by, Cyril saw that the loosening of the engagement, which had begun at Mrs. Branscombe's death, was ever increasing, while the father's hold was growing stronger and his grip tighter. If he, Cyril, could not do something to counteract this morbid influence and draw

his Love once more close to himself she would slip from him altogether; and when he thought of this, he thought also of death.

He resolved then to go down to Highwood to face, as a man should, the difficulties which beset him;—to try once more to persuade Stella to follow his fortune and forsake her father's;—to give herself to love and cast filial duty to the winds. It was his last chance, for in a few weeks he must set sail to India; and when once so far away—if he could do nothing now he could do less than nothing there. This was emphatically his last chance, his Last Appeal.

It was a sunless, dull and sultry afternoon. The lurid clouds, heavily charged with coming storm, hung low in the sky. Not a bird sang in the bushes, not a cricket chirped in the grass; the very bees flew heavily from flower to flower and the butterflies and dragon-flies rested motionless on the flowers and grey stone walls. The pimpernels in the fields and the gezanias in the gardens were shut; and the scarlet nasturtiums and geraniums glowed with so much electric fire as almost to dazzle those who looked at them steadily. A storm was evidently at hand; and all nature felt its presence and suffered because of it.

Without halting even to see Randolph Mac-

kenzie, Cyril drove straight from the railway station to the Lodge gates of Rose Hill. There was no glad familiarity of the accepted son of the house in his coming to-day, as when he made his unconventional entrance on that beaming, bright young morning in May; no impatience of happy love that could not wait for the day but must seek to distance time by giving him chase in the early dawn; no certainty of a reception as joyous as his own breathless incoming; no hope of radiant love to meet and glorify his own. There were only pale fear and stern resolve, that sinking of the heart which forebodes disaster and that setting of the will which, while it foresees the pain, courts the struggle. He came to-day less as the acknowledged lover than the desperate foeman—no inheritor of joy entering gladly on his own but an exile breaking his bond of excommunication and returning to the home whence he had been banished—that home for revisiting which he should be again discarded under maybe a still more severe sentence. Or, should he hold his own triumphantly and be victorious over fate and circumstances?

This was the question of the hour; and the moment of its answer had come.

Surely the stars in their courses fought for

him and the first omen presaged all the rest! He had tormented himself all the way down as to his chance of being able to speak to Stella alone. If her father chose to forbid, how could he prevent her obedience? But now all those fears were set at rest, for there was Stella right before him, walking slowly towards the house from the gates. She had been down to the Lodge to see the gatekeeper's little child who was ill, and now was going back to that desolate home which of late had become so much more like a prison than a home. She was thinking sadly of her sweet mother and her banished lover, her shattered hopes and that poor papa who demanded so much from her and who was sometimes so strangely cold, even while he held her so closely and depended on her so heavily. And thinking all this she did not hear the swift step behind her, nor know who was coming till Cyril lightly touched her shoulder and said: "My Love! My Love!"

She started and cried out; but the next moment her arms were round him as his were round her, and her face was lifted to his bending down to meet hers; while the only sound of welcome was a sob half of joy and half of pain, which told how she had suffered in his absence. Nor could Cyril speak. Something

that was perilously near to tears blurred his vision and cut short his words. He could only hold her in his arms—to his heart—as something lost and now found again, something tender and dear and precious which was safe for him only so long as he held it closely clasped. As she looked at him and once more met those dear faithful eyes and saw the face which represented to her all the nobleness of manhood, all the security of life and splendour of love, she forgot the dull present and the dim future; she put aside the pain that she had felt—the anguish which she foresaw—and her sob lost itself in one full happy smile, as she said in a voice that was as the very gift of her soul—"My Cyril!—Oh, once more my Cyril!"

It was all told and known; and now he felt safe. What needless torment he had given himself!—how foolishly he had lacerated his own heart! She had never wavered. His future was as safe as his past had been sure. She loved him and she would not forsake him. He had done well to come and meet that ghastly enemy of sorrow and despair—of subtle severance and vague forebodings. She could not resist him face to face. She was his and he was hers; and the little cloud that had risen

in the night of absence was swept away by the glad sunlight of actual presence.

"Come to the summer-house, Stella. We can speak better there, and I have much to say to you, my darling," said Cyril; and Stella, with a sudden half-frightened look to the house, said a little anxiously:

"Yes, for half an hour, Cyril; I must not stay longer."

"For half an hour then," he replied, putting his arm round her waist; and thus in the old loving way, as if nothing had come between their love and their happiness, the two went down the side-path to the summer-house, and reached it just as the first growl of thunder broke from the sky and the heavy drops of rain began to fall.

At first they heeded neither the weather nor the altered order of things at home. They were together and alone; and that was joy enough for the moment. Then the smoke of that glad incense of love and happiness began to clear away—the first momentary excitement subsided—and they came slowly back to things as they were and to the sorrowful truths which were as spectres awaiting them. Each saw how pale and wan and hollow-eyed the other had become; each missed that sense of security,

that sense of joy, which had marked the early stages of their love. They were like ghosts rising from the tomb and looking at each other across the moonlit space where the graves were lying thick and the dead loves of life were buried. There was no reality even here, and no certainty—save of sorrow. But they loved each other. So much was sure. Whatever the future held—they loved each other.

"You do not ask me why I have come down," Cyril began, when that silent scrutiny and acknowledgment had grown somewhat embarrassing.

"I was too glad to see you to think of anything else," she answered softly.

"I am going to India in about three weeks' time now," he said. "And I have come to ask you to go with me."

She turned away her head—she could not meet those yearning, faithful eyes—that handsome, loving face, bending down to look into hers. Her hands were in his, closely, tightly clasped. She would not take them away; but she could not look into his face!

"How can I?" she sighed.

"Why should you not?" he returned.

"How can I leave poor papa? He would die if I were to leave him."

"And what shall I do, Stella! Perhaps worse than die! If you are a daughter, remember also that you are a wife—my wife in the sight of God; and you owe me as much duty as you owe your father—and more love."

Cyril spoke with a gravity and intensity which Stella had never heard in him before. It was as if he had suddenly ceased to be a boy and become a strong, mature and self-respecting man. He was less the lover pleading for a grace than the husband, as he called himself, claiming his rights. Till now she had seen him only boyishly earnest in his suit, boyishly radiant in his success, boyishly despairing in his defeat; but now he was a man of equal strength and firmness with her father, and she felt instinctively that things had come into a new phase and that the moment was all the graver because of her lover's changed morale.

"You know that I love you," she said, turning to him with the instinct of a caress.

"I know that you do," he answered tenderly; "but though you love me, you are letting yourself be divided from me—perhaps for ever; and you are giving me more anguish than I once thought I could have borne and lived under!"

"I am not being divided from you; excepting

for a little while," she answered, woman-like preaching peace where there was no peace and forbearing to look at facts as they were. "It is only while my poor, darling mother's death is so fresh—while papa misses her so much—that I ask you to put off the marriage;—that is not breaking with you for ever, Cyril!"

"And when will your father make up his mind to let you go?" he asked. "You know that every day you are slipping farther and farther away from me, because every day you become more necessary to him. When will you find the courage to leave him and come out to me if you have not got it now?"

"He is too good and kind to break my heart," she said. "Surely, some time of his own accord he will let me go."

"Never!" said Cyril firmly. "Of his own accord, Stella—never! If you have not the courage to insist on it now and to come, he will never, never let you go!"

"Indeed you misjudge him, Cyril! You do, darling! He is broken now by poor mamma's death; but he will become more reconciled as time goes on; and then we can be married without paining him as it would now if I were to leave him. Think what it would be to him to lose wife and daughter both in a few months!

And he so loving and so sensitive—so dependent on home love and care for his happiness!"

"All this means simply that you love your father better than you love me, and that you are ready to sacrifice me to him," said Cyril with quiet sternness. "We will call things by their right names, Stella. It is a struggle of love, in which I am the weaker and go to the wall."

"Not that," she answered, the tears swelling into her eyes. "I love my father dearly, as you know, and reverence and admire him as I have been taught all my life to do—as mamma reverenced and admired him—but I love you too, Cyril; you know that I do. It is not a struggle of love, but it is a matter of conscience and duty. Cannot you see the difference? Cannot you, Cyril?"

It was his turn now to look away. His face was pale and set; his eyes were fixed and mournful; his heart was sore and his pride was wounded. She did then of her own free will prefer her father to him; and it was not coercion so much as voluntary resignation.

The thunder roared and shook the little building where they were sheltered; the lightning flashed and streamed in fiery tongues

and flaming sheets; the rain poured as if the windows of heaven had been opened for the second time and the fury of the deluge had been let loose on the earth. But neither Cyril nor Stella saw what was going on in the world outside. The storm of grief and despair, of passion, of perplexity, of love warring with duty, which raged within their hearts was greater than that of the elements without; and the thunder and the lightning and the rain which tore and flashed and fell, were but the natural accompaniments of the passions which shook them to the soul and the anguish which made them desolate.

"Cannot you see the difference, Cyril?" she said again, her hand stealing into his. "Do you doubt that I love you?"

"You love me?" he said with a strong effort, How harsh and changed his voice was! She would not have known it for his had they been in the dark. "Yes, I believe that you do, to a certain extent. But you love your father better, and prefer his convenience to my happiness."

"If I could leave any one with him to take care of him and make him happy, I would not hesitate for a moment," said Stella with sudden passion. "It is not that I love him better—you know that it is not that, Cyril; it is only

because he is my father, and it is my duty. Oh, you will break my heart if you look like that—if you believe that I do not love you!"

Her girlish bashfulness, her pride of maidenhood, her shamefaced reticence—all were gone—swept away by the storm of passion as the tender little buds and delicate flowers were broken and destroyed beneath the heavy deluge of rain. She flung her arms round him and carried his head to her bosom.

"Cyril, say that you believe me," she said, her lips, for the first time unasked, pressed to his. "My own, my Love, say that you do not doubt me."

He felt his advantage, and he used it.

"If you cannot come with me—if you think it your duty to stay for a little while longer with your father—at least make things sure. Marry me before I go, if even you stay behind, and come out afterwards."

He spoke without any outward sign of emotion; still with that strange absence of boyish pleading and with that stranger weight and gravity of a mature man.

"With papa's consent—yes!—yes!—gladly!" said Stella. "Will that satisfy you, Cyril?—then indeed I will!"

"With your father's consent or without it?" he said.

She shrank back. The flood-gates which had been lifted began gradually to close down on the turbulence that had been let loose for a few moments. The pride of her maidenhood, the reticence and shamefacedness of her girlish modesty, the purity of her truth, the wholeness of her duty, all sent back the rushing flood about her heart and cleared her eyes of their mist of passion.

"Without papa's consent I could not," she said faltering. "I could neither openly disobey him nor live a life of deception. You yourself would not respect me, Cyril, if I could."

"Ah! it is just as I thought," he said with sudden bitterness. "Great heavens, do women know how much they torture the men who love them! All of no use!—all to no good! I am distanced and cut off! No, Stella, this is not love! It is preference—friendship—fancy—but not love!—not the love I have for you. Ask anything of me," he continued, his passion rising as hers calmed; "ask my very life, and I would give it you! You could not ask anything of me, Stella, that I would refuse. Nothing in the whole wide world!"

"If I asked you to do something that I thought dishonourable and wrong, you would

not do that, Cyril!" she answered, half frightened, half trying to sooth him.

"Yes, I would!" he cried. "I would go to perdition for you. I would give you my very soul!"

Just then a blinding flash of lightning seemed to set the whole place in a blaze, and the thunder crashed right above the frail little tenement where they were sitting. Stella was wise and sensible enough, but she was impressionable, and as apt for superstitious fancies as any other girl of her kind and age.

"Hush, Cyril! this is blasphemy," she cried, clinging to him in terror. "Remember God hears us, and sees us, and reads our hearts. You offend God when you talk like this."

Her terrified voice and clinging touch, her pale, scared face and spiritual distress, broke down all the new force and manly strength which had come into him. He covered his face with his hands and burst into those terrible tears which more than anything else in the world agonize the woman who loves and humiliate the man who is loved.

"Cyril, do not cry!" she said in a low, still, shocked voice. "You are breaking my heart. I do not know you like this. Cyril, look up. Do not let yourself give way like this. Oh,

darling, let us pray to God to give us strength to do what is right and what is His will! There is no happiness for us if we do what is wrong and what we know to be wrong."

But poor Cyril was in no state to be soothed. He had to fight out the fight by himself and to brace himself to bear the inevitable, as he felt best for himself. Pure and honest for his own part, he could not tempt Stella to do what she felt to be wrong. If he could have changed her heart at this moment, and for her own higher morality have substituted one weaker, lower and more yielding to love, he would; but he could not tempt her into what she felt to be immoral and dishonourable. He had to recognize and accept her virtue. He was foot to foot with facts; and he was cast. He must give up all his hope, his pride, his desire. Stella had elected to stand by her father and she had laid her conscience as the pledge. He must abide by her decision; but it was a bitter award, and he felt as if death would have been a more merciful decree.

"You shall not do what you think wrong, for me," he said at last, his bloodless lips quivering. "I would rather have you pure in your own conscience than that you should do what you think wrong for my sake. If you

feel it right, I will give you up. It is like parting with my life to say this; but, if you feel it right, I must."

"Not give me up, Cyril!—only wait till papa is more reconciled to his loss. This is not giving me up, darling!" she said anxiously.

"It is the beginning of the end," he returned. "If I leave England now, I shall never see you again."

"Would you wish not to see me again? Would you rather give me up entirely than keep me for a short time in hope?" asked Stella in a low voice.

He caught her eagerly to his heart and smoothed back the hair from her face.

"My Love! my Love!" he said with infinite tenderness, with loving reverence. "I would wait for you to the end of my life, if you would come to me then! Give you up, Stella? I give you up? Never, my darling, never. If we are separated, it is by your will, not mine. You are mine to the end of my life!—my own, my Love! I could never give you up, never cease to love you, never possibly love another!"

The storm had passed and the sun had come out. That last tremendous outbreak had been the last expression of its fury. The rain-drops

still glittered on the grass and trees, but the birds began to sing in the woods, the flowers raised their drooping heads, the butterflies and iridescent flies came out from their leafy shelters. The storm had passed indeed; but outside this summer-house the plot of Mary-lilies which Stella had planted with her own hands was a broken mass of tangled wreck, and the tender buds of all the delicate flowers were beaten into the ground—never to rise again, never to bloom, never to gladden the air with their sweetness nor to receive the sun's rays into their fragrant hearts.

"Come and see papa," then said Stella softly. "The storm has gone now. Come and talk to him."

"It is of no use," said Cyril sadly. "I understand him better than you do."

"Then you understand how sweet and noble he is," said Stella, speaking from the force of old impressions and life-long training, and forgetting for the instant that painful little passage-at-arms—presage of so much worse to come—which had taken place between them some days ago.

Cyril turned away. Suffering had enlightened him on Mr. Branscombe's real claim to the possession of those qualities for which his wife's

deliberate devotion and his daughter's simplicity of belief had given him credit.

"I will go and see him, of course," he said, after a pause. "I would not like him to think that I had been here in secret and was ashamed or afraid to face him."

"Oh, Cyril, how good you are!" cried Stella.

She looked up into his face, enthusiasm, love, devotion in her own. Her large dilated eyes were dark with tenderness; her sweet fresh lips were a little parted; her whole heart was throbbing with passionate and high-strung admiration. For the instant she forgot that she had any cause for sorrow. She remembered only that she loved—and that her gladness lay in the grandeur of her beloved.

Cyril could not answer her. Her enthusiasm was born of his heart-break—her praise came because of his submission to the terms of his despair. He could not return it even for gratitude.

"Good and great!" he echoed bitterly. "My Stella, say rather how weak and miserable! One more kiss," he then said, turning to her with less of the feverishness of love than the melancholy resignation of death. "I asked you to be my wife in this summer-house. Do you remember, Stella? I watched your window

from it the first time I came down after we were engaged. Give me now our last parting kiss—perhaps the last we shall ever have—our very last on earth!"

"No, not our last," she said with strange confidence, borne up she knew not how over the weakness and surging sorrow of the moment. "Our last for the immediate present—but we have a future, Cyril, and a glorious one. We have a future of true love, of mutual respect and of happiness."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FINAL ANSWER.

"My child! where have you been during this terrible storm?" said Mr. Branscombe, when Stella, with Cyril following close behind, went into her father's studio to report herself and present her lover. "I have been in the most acute mental anguish on your account—the most heart-breaking anxiety."

For a gentleman who had been in this great anxiety, as he said, Mr. Branscombe looked smooth and unruffled enough. Also, he had not been idle; for he had painted in a large piece of Hortensia's gown—the folds perhaps a little fanciful, seeing that like most talented amateurs he worked by the light of imagination only, disdaining the dull prose of a model. However that might be, he had evidently diligently occupied himself during his daughter's absence, and had thrown off his mental distress by means

of the eccentric curves and impossible cross-shadows which represented his ideas of drapery.

"I was under shelter, papa," said Stella in a strange voice.

Now that she had come into the actual presence of her father—the father not of her imagination but of her every-day life—the exalted confidence of her late mood suddenly cooled and slackened.

"Where?" he asked, not looking up.

"In the summer-house," she said. "The storm overtook Cyril and me as we came up the drive from the Lodge."

"Cyril? Cyril? What Cyril?" asked Mr. Branscombe with a vague air, as if searching in his memory for the image that should be attached to that name.

"Cyril Ponsonby, sir; Stella's affianced husband," said Cyril, coming forward and speaking in a calm, clear, level voice.

"Oh, Cyril Ponsonby, is it! Gad, my dear fellow, I had forgotten you!" said Mr. Branscombe with careless amiability. "And what in heaven's name has brought you out here on such a day!"

He spoke as if Cyril had come in from next door; and as if he had been here only yesterday and might be here again to-morrow.

"I came to see you and Stella," said Cyril.

"Vastly obliging!" said Mr. Branscombe with his best-bred smile, tempered with melancholy as his eye caught the band of crape on the arm of his velvet coat and he remembered all the circumstances in which he stood.

In the first flush of surprise he had remembered only the one fact—that Cyril wanted to take Stella from him; with the determination, as a rider, that she should not go.

"I am going to India in less than three weeks now," began Cyril; "and I have come to ask Stella to marry and come with me."

Mr. Branscombe put his head on one side the better to examine the effect of his latest bit of cross-hatching.

"I thought all that was arranged and done with," he said quietly. "When I had last the pleasure of seeing you I remember we threshed out that question fully—threshed it out to the last fibre. It was agreed then, I think, that Stella would not leave me—at least for the first year of her mourning; that she would not commit the indelicacy of treading on the heels of her mother's funeral as a bride given up to Circean pleasures. Why reopen a closed book, my young friend? Do you not think we have enough to do with things present and to come

without going back on those which are sealed and past?"

"I do not hold this matter to be sealed and past," said Cyril. "I was willing to concede something to your grief at the sudden shock of your loss, but I did not give up my claims. I waived them for the immediate moment; but I hold to them as absolute."

"I think you gave them up so far as any definition of time, any express limitation of suspended rights, went," returned Mr. Branscombe smoothly. "It was agreed, if I remember aright—expressly agreed—that Stella should not marry this year; therefore that she could not go out to India with you in September. Indeed, I imagine you would scarcely prevail on her to desert me in the heartless manner proposed by you. Such a dutiful and pious child as she could hardly be guilty of an act wherein indecency would be equalled only by irreligion."

"I think too, that Stella remembers a little what is due to me and her promise," said Cyril, always speaking in that calm, clear, level voice which betrays the consciousness of struggle even more than the loud tones of expressed excitement and, with the consciousness of struggle, the presence of hidden force.

"Duty to parents comes first in a good girl's catalogue of virtues," said Mr. Branscombe.

"And faithfulness to a promise—fidelity to a husband—are also virtues which hold rank in her mind," Cyril answered back.

"When she has the husband, yes," said Mr. Branscombe with a slightly contemptuous smile. "A foolish boy and girl engagement can scarcely claim the appellation which includes the sacred tie of marriage."

"A foolish boy and girl engagement? I do not understand you, sir," said Cyril hastily.

"No? Yet I speak plainly, do I not? I use no technical terms, do I?"

Mr. Branscombe asked this question with the simplest air of transparent candour; as if sincerely wishing to be answered and instructed.

"Not technical terms but unintelligible ones—words which do not apply to the case in hand," said Cyril.

"No? You are now unintelligible to me, my dear fellow," he answered, smiling. "Explain yourself."

"I do not think I need, Mr. Branscombe. When you can call a solemn engagement, like Stella's and mine—an engagement sanctioned by both you and her dear mother—an engagement which this very month, almost this very

day, was to have been fulfilled by our marriage —when you can sneer at this as a foolish boy and girl affair, then I think I have the right to ask you for your meaning on the ground that you are unintelligible."

"Oh, that is where the crux lies!" said Mr. Branscombe. "I am sorry if I have offended your susceptibilities. I am always sorry to wound the feelings of any one."

"Dear papa!" murmured Stella, still in the region of faith as she was.

"Still, I must keep to my nomenclature," he continued. "In spite of all you may say I maintain the folly, the unfitness and the undesirability of this affair."

"Unfitness? undesirability?" said Cyril, almost as if in a dream.

"Frankly speaking, my dear fellow," Mr. Branscombe went on to say with imperturbable calm; "you are not the kind of husband I would have chosen for Stella. Her mother, sainted soul! liked you—you are, I suppose, the kind of thing women do like—and as I was always the attentive interpreter of my good Matilda's wishes, as also I thought that the mother had perhaps more right to regulate the daughter's life than had even the father, I gave in to her desire and sanctioned the engagement because

she had endorsed it. But now when, by the mysterious decree of Providence, she has been removed from this earthly sphere and I am left sole guardian of my child, I must use my own discretion, act according to my own ideas, and regulate her life as I think best for her happiness here and hereafter. We cannot be guided by the counsels of the dead. Though I am sorry to distress you and to annoy my child, I must speak plainly; and, plainly, I do not approve of this engagement."

"Mr. Branscombe!"—"Papa!" said the two young people in a breath.

"And if Stella is the dutiful daughter I believe her to be," said Mr. Branscombe in conclusion, not heeding those two passionate ejaculations; "she will give it up now at once, here in this room and in my hearing."

"Papa! papa! I cannot!" cried poor Stella, instinctively turning to Cyril.

The young man put his arm round her and held her to him in the attitude of protection.

"She will not leave me," he said a little triumphantly.

Mr. Branscombe laid down his paint-brush and palette, as he had done once before. He made a few steps nearer to the young people as they stood before him, and saw Paul and Vir-

ginia clinging together in the last embrace. As he came nearer he held out his arms.

"Must they be held out to empty space?" he said, his mellow voice trembling. "Must I go down to the grave in the evening of my life a lonely and deserted old man?—without wife or child to cheer my darkened day, to guide my faltering steps? You, my child, my idolized child—my Stella—my Star—you to leave me for a stranger?—to desert me with such ungrateful haste? It will not be for long. I shall not keep her for many months, young man! Cannot she tarry with me for these few weeks till my weary eyes are sealed in death, and my lifeless form is laid in the silent grave beside her dear, dead mother? Must I be the modern Lear, pleading in vain?"

"Dear papa! I cannot bear to hear you talk like this," said Stella, disengaging herself from her lover but not giving herself to her father—standing for a brief moment as if undecided between the two.

"You look well and vigorous, sir, by no means near the tragic end you depict so forcibly," said Cyril unwisely and hastily.

His eyes were not blinded by long years of habit and tender teaching. He heard the hollow ring of the base metal so adroitly passed off for

gold, and saw through the flimsy cheat which poor Stella accepted so simply for reality.

"Are you so eager, young man?" asked Mr. Branscombe with pathetic dignity dashed with a not unnatural, not unmanly, indignation. "Are you so weary of this little spell of waiting and so anxious to have me safely housed in that grave which gives not back its prey when once engulphed, that you may enter in such indecent haste on your own pleasures?"

"No, Cyril did not mean that, papa!" Stella said in agony. "You did not, Cyril, did you? Say that you did not!"

"I did not wish you dead, sir; and I congratulate you on your prospect of long life," said Cyril slowly. "But I do not want to hold Stella only on the contingency of your death. I want her to be mine in your lifetime, while we are young and you are healthy. It is a very natural wish. I should scarcely be a man to feel differently."

"Stella has her own heart only to consult," said Mr. Branscombe with a sudden throwing up of his cards. "She knows that I will not stand in the way of her happiness. If she can find her happiness in this desertion of her father I will not oppose it. She may marry if she will. I will not forbid that marriage;

but I cannot sanction it by my approval or my presence. I should regard it as an impious insult to her mother's memory, as well as the warrant of my own death. Let that be as it may—marry, if you will. Marry—yes, marry, my child—to-morrow if it seems good to you; but take your leave of your old father for ever, and know that you have walked over his heart to the altar and that you have desecrated your mother's grave!"

"But this is too terrible—too dreadful!" cried Stella wildly. "Papa! you know that neither Cyril nor I would give you pain."

"Yet you are giving me pain—acute pain—anguish, I may say!" cried Mr. Branscombe, suddenly laying his hand on his heart and sinking into a chair.

His head was thrown back, his mouth was open, his eyes were shut and his arms hung loosely by his sides. It was the best imitation of fainting that could be seen on the stage or off it; and it was more than poor Stella could bear. She did not see the true face peeping out from behind that tragic mask; and her father's histrionic make-believe had on her all the terrifying and softening effect that he had hoped and for which he had played.

Cyril too, though he had not had much

experience in attacks of this sort, and though he doubted in his own mind the genuineness of what he saw now, was obliged to accept it as truth, not being able to prove its falsehood; and he did his best with Stella to revive that which had not failed.

After a time Mr. Branscombe thought fit to come out of his swoon and to be once more alive to facts and awake to sorrow. He raised his head from Stella's breast, sat upright and looked about him a little vaguely. Then he passed his hand over his eyes and smiled faintly, sweetly, with resignation and benignity.

"You have surprised my secret, my dear children," he said with the most touching air of noble self-surrender. "My heart has long been affected, like my dear wife's. Poor soul! she never knew! And any strong emotion reduces me to the state in which you have just seen me. After my loss I passed nights in this semi-death—this terrible condition of insensibility from which the waking is so agonizing—so destroying! But now let the past conversation, and all its pain, be forgotten. You shall not find me in your way, my Stella. My good Cyril, I will not stand against your happiness. Marry, marry, and let me die, knowing that though I am heartbroken you are happy."

"I cannot leave you like this, papa," said innocent Stella with an appealing look to Cyril. "Dearest Cyril, we cannot leave him," she repeated.

"Yet I can die alone!" he said, smiling faintly. "It would be pleasant to see my child's angel face as the last thing on earth visible to my failing sight—the last thing here before I meet her mother there; but——"

Here he stopped. His voice faltered; he turned away his head; then taking Stella to his heart he broke down into a purely feminine flood of weeping.

So here were her two beloved men, each in one day reduced to the level of hysterical girls, and all because of her!

If Cyril's tears had been painful, her father's were terrible to poor Stella to witness. Her whole life had been trained in belief in and adoration of him. He represented to her her mother's love and reverence—her mother's counsels and decrees. He was all her past and all her duty, her love, her home, her religion. Cyril was her future, her young love and her happiness; but her father was her life; and in her obedience to him was included the approbation of the Supreme and the clearness of her own conscience.

"You shall not be left, papa," she said in a moved and solemn voice. "Cyril himself would not wish it. Cyril, you would not ask me to leave papa in this state, would you, darling? I should never be happy if I did!"

"I would not ask you to do what you think to be wrong," Cyril answered. "I only wish you to act according to the dictates of your own conscience and the inspiration of your own heart."

"Yes, act according to your own heart and conscience," said Mr. Branscombe feebly, taking the girl's hand and carrying it to his lips. "My child, choose! Your father or your lover —choose quickly! I cannot support this much longer!"

Tears stood in his eyes again and he gave a deep sigh; then he began to sob; and it seemed as if the fainting fit from which he had just recovered were to be re-enacted. As Mr. Branscombe gave these premonitory symptoms of another collapse Cyril stiffened and hardened. Until now he had stood pale and quiet, as if struck to stone; but now his lip curled with contempt.

"Cyril, say I am right!" pleaded Stella, whose faith in her father was as yet illimitable and unshaken.

"Right in what?" he asked sternly.

It was cruel to her, but for himself he wanted the sharpness of the spoken word—he wanted to have the knife turned in his wound.

"To stay with papa," she said, turning to her father but holding out her hand to her lover.

"Good-bye," then said Cyril, after a moment of dumb agony. "Good-bye for ever, Stella."

"No, no! not for ever! Cyril, say not for ever!" she pleaded.

"For ever!" he repeated. "Your father will take you from me for ever. Good-bye, Stella. God bless you! God bless you, my one only Love! May you never repent your choice! Be happy without me, Stella; but I shall remain faithful to you to the end of my life."

He took her almost forcibly from her father, and held her closely pressed in his arms; kissed her pale face with all a boy's passion and a man's devotion—with the reverence of worship, the fervour of love; then, without another word, with no sign of farewell to Mr. Branscombe, no repeated blessing to Stella, he turned and left the room. A moment after Stella heard the house door close, and knew then that the sunshine of her life was shut out for

ever, and that she was left only to the cold dim starlight of sacrifice and duty. She turned to her father and knelt at his feet, lifting her bloodless face to his in mute agony, dumb appeal. It was the devotee entreating the grace of her god to whom she had sacrificed her beloved.

"My child," said Mr. Branscombe solemnly, laying his hand on her head; "that young man was not worthy of you. You have chosen the better part, my Stella, and while you have blessed me you have redeemed yourself!"

"No, no!" cried Stella wildly; "anything but that, papa! My heart, my life, all—all I have—but leave me my faith in Cyril! As long as I live I must love Cyril!"

"Poor, passionate, misguided moth!" sighed Mr. Branscombe grandly. "On my breast let the scorched wings be healed!"

He raised her from her knees and held her to his heart, even at this moment his eyes wandering towards his easel and that interrupted bit of cross-hatching. But for the first time in her life her father's caress gave poor Stella neither joy nor comfort—gave her instead something akin to pain—something from which she involuntarily shrank as partly a wound and partly a desecration.

CHAPTER IX.

HER FIRST RESERVE.

In all country places where the boys of the several families come down in the summer to go back in the autumn, the sudden transition from abounding gaiety to blank and dreary dulness is one of the most painful experiences which life can give to the girls who have lost their playfellows and to the mothers who have parted with their sons. For two months the whole neighbourhood has been riotously alive with the doings of the young fellows whose whole aim of existence has been to get through as much enjoyment as can be compressed into the twenty-four hours, and to make as much noise about it as if pleasure needed a trumpeter to tell the world how she fares. Shouts and laughter, signal and song, have wakened up the echoes of the day; and the low whisper,

the fond word, the stolen kiss, have added to the harmonies of the fragrant night. These fine, swift, stalwart, beardless lads have been in their strength like young lions and in their beauty like boy-gods—lords of the earth and masters of life and of love—possessors of the present and heirs of the future alike. The whole place has been theirs. By their frank good-humour, by their thoughtless joy, by the very force of their vitality, they have taken all the fortresses of shyness and pride, of reserve and ill-will; till even the crabbedest old maid has smoothed her ribbons as they passed, and the most suspicious mother of a well-dowered daughter has learned to believe there was no harm in them after all.

And now they have gone and the bright bubble has broken! Silent, deserted, lifeless, the scene of their pleasures and the theatre of their triumphs knows them no more; melancholy reigns in the place of delight; and the women have to endure regret where they formerly possessed gladness. No longer boats shoot down the river or skim across the lake—boats where emphatically youth was at the prow and pleasure at the helm, and the Burden was one of Fair Women with no place for Our Lady of Pain among them. No longer the ping of

the guns is heard from wood and swamp, from stubble field and heathery moor. Foxes may carry their brushes in peace and pride; hares may crouch in their forms and never prick their ears in fearful listening for the footsteps of the enemy; rabbits may nibble the sweet grass of the meadows and turn up their little white tufts in disdain of powder and shot, a good aim and a long range; and all the birds of the air may fly where they will, their feeding-grounds under the heavens are once more safe and their own.

Lonesome and given up to maiden meditations, by no means fancy free, the girls are now as safe as the birds of the air and the little brown beasts of the field. They may come and go, walk out or bide at home as they list; not the most careful mother now feels anxious as to where her Juliet may be roaming nor what she may be doing. She can come to no harm; unless, indeed, ineligible Romeos should spring up on the moorlands like mushrooms in a night, or the woods should grow detrimentals like berries on the bushes. This consciousness of safety makes life to Juliet's mother a very different thing from what it was when Romeo—rich in health, in youth, good looks and hope, but with never a profession

as yet to his name, nor a penny-piece to call his own save what his father pays for his education and allows him for pocket-money—was rambling through space and experimentalizing on elective affinities. Then no one knew what might be asked in the gloaming to be granted in the moonlight, and to bring trouble to every one concerned when the cool morning came and impossibility was seen to be beyond the stature and strength of love. All this harass and anxiety are over now. The hour of youthful bliss in peril, and of maternal pain in fear, is at an end; and the dulness of safety with the peace of security reigns in its stead.

This was the kind of thing that had come now to Highwood. Social dreariness and feminine freedom from danger were at their height. All those young fellows, whose presence had brought so much happiness and no less danger, had now gone. Cyril Ponsonby, no longer a joyous confident boy, but a grave, stern, saddened man, was on his way to India. Randolph Mackenzie was in London, unsettled as to his future, but not inclining to the Orders so warmly insisted on by his cousin. The Cowley boys were at the University which had the honour of bearing them on its books, but which had not yet been able to hew out a mental

pathway by which to cart the bricks of the higher mathematics into their brains. Jemmy Pennefather had joined his ship, and was now sailing away to the Chinese seas; the middle two boys had been drafted off, the one to college and the other to school; while Jack, the youngest, who loved adventure and despised Latin, had gone out to a tea-plantation in India, not far from Cyril's station. Sandro Kemp was, no one knew where; and Highwood was given up to women, needlework, dulness and regret.

The only bachelors left in the place were Colonel Moneypenny and Dr. Quigley; but these, though eligible for matrimony, were not lovers like Cyril, friends like Sandro, nor confidants like Randolph. Least of all were they playfellows like the Pennefathers and the Cowley boys. And as for the matrimonial possibilities included in their state and fortune —no one wanted anything with them.

No; the sun of Highwood had set for the season, and Ichabod was the epitaph written over its russet woods for summer green, its bare brown fields for golden grain, its autumn weeds for spring-time flowers. Spring, summer and the rich red days of autumn had gone; and they had entered now into that season of drip and damp, of mud and mire and rank decay

which comes before the time of frost and snow.

Where all were sad it was hard to say who most deserved compassion. That specious doctrine of compensation was true for once, and to each was left a little flower of moral satisfaction, which in some sort atoned for the loss of the larger growth. Stella had the sense of duty well-fulfilled, her sweet unselfishness, and her beloved papa. Augusta had also the sense of her duty well-fulfilled, her cheerful reasonableness of submission to the inevitable, and her darling boy. The Pennefathers had their good spirits which were independent of conditions, and the satisfaction of devising and embroidering certain startling costumes to be worn at Christmas when the boys should be at home and there would be more than one pocketful of fun, arranged according to the season. Hortensia had her elegant idol, who was occupied in making her mind much as she had desired to make her stalwart cousin's. And for the rest—who can undo the past or soften the decrees of that inexorable Fate whereby we are ruled to our sorrow? What was, was; and the fardels of life had to be borne, whether light or heavy, pleasant or painful.

Still, things were very blank and very dreary;

and the efforts of the women to look bright and content, as they stood under their dripping umbrellas and greeted each other by the church-porch or on the roads, were heroic if useless. It was simply the meeting of the Roman augurs who looked into each other's faces and did not laugh.

A coolness, without name or explanation, had sprung up between The Laurels and Rose Hill. Augusta recognized in Mr. Branscombe an active enemy who would even give himself trouble to give her pain; and Mr. Branscombe recognized in Augusta a critic whose sharp eyes were not to be dazzled by finery nor dimmed by flattery. No wash of gold nor softening tint of rose-colour for her! No feverish enthusiasm nor blind belief for this calm, cool Critic of Pure Reason! No wonder, then, that he was her active enemy, living as he did for praise alone and caring nothing for truth and things as they were.

There was no ill-feeling between Augusta and Stella, and each knew herself loved, pitied and in some sense understood by the other; but the widow was as angry with Mr. Branscombe as with Colonel Moneypenny, and with both so far as reason would allow her to be angry with any one. Like all wise people she

looked on passions as boomerangs which come back with a blow on one's own pate, save when one is so powerful as to rise above circumstances; and then they are luxuries. Being angry, she did nothing to break down the coolness that had sprung up between her and Rose Hill; but being reasonable, she did nothing to add to it. She took no public action, and to the world was on exactly the same terms as before; but she kept away from the house—and Mr. Branscombe understood why.

One day the two young women met face to face on the road. Both were walking—Augusta with her child, Stella alone.

"Why, Stella, alone! How is this?" cried Augusta, as they came up to each other.

She took the girl's hands in hers and kissed the poor, pale face that looked so white and wan, surrounded by its mourning veil, for all that this was the public road and a ploughman had his horses' heads to the hedge.

"Papa has gone to Derwent Lodge. He did not want me to-day, and said I had better go for a little walk," answered Stella.

She had the leaden look and listless accent of a person whose fount of happiness has run dry, and whose life is now one of sufferance rather

than of active energy. She carried her cross in patience truly, but she did not try to cheat herself into the belief that it was wreathed with flowers not thorns.

"Turn back with me and come for a pleasant walk by the river-side. It is fresher than this dull road; and Tony and I are going. Come! It will be better for you than tramping along the highway by yourself."

Stella had an idea, by no means hazy, that her beloved papa would rather she did not walk by the river-side or elsewhere with Augusta Latrobe; and had she seen her way to an excuse she would have refused on any ground but the right. But she was taken unawares and unprepared; and she could not find it in her heart to pain this sweet-tempered, kindly-mannered woman, who had always been good to her and who had, besides, been such a favourite with dearest mamma and Cyril's staunchest friend. So, yielding to the temptation of complaisance, she said: "Yes, she would go; and it would be pleasanter by the river-side with Augusta and little Tony than here on the dull high-road by herself."

Whereat the two went into the field through which they had to pass before they reached the river, and talked as they went on everything

outside their hearts and in which they felt no kind of interest.

Augusta had not been to the river since that day when she had met Sandro under the elm-tree, sketching the rock overgrown with flowers. This had been the day after Mrs. Branscombe's funeral; and though she was as little superstitious as weak, she caught the coincidence of thus falling upon Stella on the very day when she had determined to brave her memories and suppress them by the overlay of a new association. These coincidences which mean nothing, often occur in our lives, she thought sagely. Still it was odd; and she noted it curiously.

"Augusta," said Stella suddenly, just as they crossed the field and came full on to the river; "what has become of Mr. Kemp? Do you know?"

She spoke without note of warning; quickly, abruptly; as if the sight of that river, which ran so full of his name and presence to Augusta, had suddenly brought the artist to her mind too.

"I do not know, dear," answered the widow, turning to struggle with a tough bit of ragwort and calling to her boy to come and have a few golden flowers stuck into his cap.

"You do not know where he is?" said the

girl again. "Then no one does, for you were his best friend."

"Was I?" replied Augusta, occupied with her boy's cap and his golden flowers. "I was not aware of that fact, Stella mia," she continued with admirable indifference; "but if you say so, I suppose I was."

"We always thought so," said Stella.

"Oh yes, I remember now!" replied Augusta with a little dash of malice which she knew Stella would not understand. "Your father made out some odd theory of the same kind the last time you called on us. But you have it all to yourselves," she added with a forced laugh. "I make you a present of the whole affair—friendship, intimacy, everything."

"I did not know, of course, but I always thought you were very great friends," repeated Stella, wide of the truth and dense as to her companion's meaning. "At all events, he has left Highwood and I do not think that he intends to come back."

"So?" returned Augusta quietly; but her fair face grew from fair to pale, and she opened her lips while her nostrils dilated as if her breath came with difficulty.

"He is very unhappy about something; so perhaps that marriage which was talked about

is broken off, poor fellow!" said Stella, her eyes filling with tears.

Reason enough, according to her own sorrowful glossary, why any one should be unhappy, and why tears should come into her eyes for sympathy with those who, like herself, had lost their Love!

"Perhaps it is," said Augusta. "Who told you he was unhappy?"

"Mary—Mrs. Prinsep. She did not say why. She said indeed, she did not know; but he left Fernacres quite suddenly one day after he had received a letter; and he did not say where he was going. Nor has he written to say where he is, nor when he was coming back. It is very strange, is it not?"

"Very strange," said Augusta, speaking automatically.

"Poor fellow! Something must have gone wrong!" continued Stella.

"Yes, something must," said the widow.

"I wonder what it is, Augusta!"

"I wonder," was the echo.

"Mary said he looked dreadfully unhappy," continued the innocent torturer.

"Ah?" returned her listener.

"I am so sorry he has left like this. I had seen a good deal of him lately. Papa used to

have him to the house very often; and I liked him so much. He was always so kind and gentle. I liked him really very much of late; did not you, Augusta?"

"I? Yes, I liked him," said Augusta, in the manner of one waking from sleep and making an effort to concentrate her attention. "Every one liked him, so far as that goes," she added vaguely.

"What a miserable world it is! How much unhappiness there is everywhere!" said Stella. "Once I used to think that every one, excepting the very poor, was necessarily happy. I could not imagine why people complained so much of the miseries of life; but now I do not wonder. Every one seems to be so wretched! I really think the Pennefathers are the only thoroughly happy people here. Even Hortensia is not sincerely so, though she declares that she is; and you are not either, Augusta."

"No, I am not happy," said Augusta with a sudden rush of feeling. "Certainly, I am not happy!"

"Poor darling! you must be wretched! I know you must," said Stella, thinking of the dead husband with a side glance to the living mother. "You have lost so much!"

For a moment Augusta felt inclined to open

her heart and make the girl a present of her confidence. She stopped herself in time, and kept back the dangerous thoughts before they took shape or sound in words. No, she must be silent. It was not in her way to make confidences at any time. She knew that the more she was sufficient for herself the more completely she would triumph, not only over her own weaknesses which were few, but over her external difficulties which were many. Besides, an unmarried girl cannot understand how a widow, or a woman past her first youth, should be in love at all. The one is sacrilegious, the other ridiculous. No; she must not reveal herself to Stella Branscombe. She must receive confidences, not give them; give sympathy, not receive it. She must let no one see the shadow of the cross she bore for love of her boy—she must scarcely confess to herself that she bore any cross at all! Strength grows better the less we dig about the roots of our difficulties, and sorrows increase by contemplation but dwindle when we refuse to look at them. Nor could she even say: "I have had to write a dreadful letter to Mr. Kemp," for that would be giving the clue which would lead straight into the heart of the maze. She must say nothing save what was substantially

untrue as an indication, as she repeated Stella's words:

"Yes, I have indeed lost much! But not more than you have, my darling. You, too, have lost all!"

"I have papa," said Stella with a sob.

"And I my boy," said the widow, checking a sigh.

Suddenly she turned with strange passion to the girl.

"Oh, Stella!" she cried, stopping in her walk and laying her hands on the shoulders which had once been so round and smooth and were now so sharp and angular; "you should have done as I told you. You should have married Cyril Ponsonby! You should not have minded what any one said—you should have kept your promise and have married him!"

"How could I, Augusta?" said Stella piteously. "Papa would have died without me!"

"Oh, no, he would not!" said Augusta, still with the same odd unusual heat of manner traversed now by a bitter vein of sarcasm. "He would have got on quite well without you. He would have missed you at first, of course, but he would soon have made some

comfortable arrangement for himself, and he would have been quite as well satisfied as he is now. And you and Cyril would have been happy. Now you will regret your loss all your life, and so will Cyril. For of course I know, like all the world, that the engagement is broken off now—not only the marriage postponed, as it was at first; and I know that I may speak to you as if you were my younger sister."

"But papa is so good. He could not have been left after poor mamma went. It was my duty to stay with him. And he is so good," Stella said again, as if she were repeating an ave or a charm.

"If he had been as good as you say, he would have let you marry and be happy, instead of sacrificing you to his own vanity and selfishness," thought Augusta. But again she pressed back dangerous thoughts before they had taken shape or sound. Stella's blind faith in her father almost irritated her seeing so clearly as she did; it seemed to be less filial piety than intellectual fatuity; and she longed to enlighten the girl and make her see the truth as she herself and others saw it. Still, it was not her duty, Augusta reflected, to open a daughter's eyes to the pitifulness of the sham whereof love

had made a demigod; but she kept to her point all the same.

"You should have married him," she repeated, as warmly as before. "You have ruined his life as well as your own; and it was not in your duty to throw him off as it would be in mine. You have no one to care for, to protect, for whom to sacrifice yourself as I have. Your father can take care of himself; my boy can not—and he has only me to love him and look after his best interests."

And then, how strange a thing to happen!—Augusta Latrobe, the calm, reasonable, self-restrained woman suddenly loosed the reins of her control and covered her face in her hands; and Stella saw the tears steal through her fingers and fall like rain to the ground.

She was shocked, startled, half-frightened. She felt as if Augusta had told her that she had some mortal malady and must die, or had committed some deadly crime and must be punished. She could not understand it all, nor see what she meant and to what she alluded; when suddenly the little fellow came running up to his mother, clinging to her gown and whimpering.

"Mamma, why do you cry?" he said. "This is just the place where you cried that

day when we saw Mr. Kemp. What makes you always cry here? Has Stella been talking to you as Mr. Kemp did?"

The truth leapt out like fire into the girl's face.

"She loves Sandro Kemp and has had to refuse him because her mother would not let her marry him!"

This was the meaning of it all. Henceforth she knew the secret of her friend's life. It was a shock, of course, a wrench to her respect, a trial of her faith, as Augusta knew that it would be. But mental prejudices generally go down before affection and sympathy, and Stella remembered only that her friend suffered, and forgot that as a widow beyond thirty she had no right to suffer as she did at all.

"Poor darling! poor love!" she said in an undertone, kissing her even as Augusta had kissed her, from the fulness of her sympathy and sorrow.

The widow raised her face and returned the caress.

"Never speak of this to me," she said in a low voice; and then gave herself to the task of comforting her little boy who had suddenly broken his heart for sorrow, fear and jealousy together.

So now the two understood each other

without fuller explanation, but with perfect confidence; and womanlike, each was as much interested in the other's love as if it had been her own. And while Augusta wondered if she could not induce Stella still to marry Cyril, Stella wondered if there was any way by which Augusta could possibly permit herself to marry Sandro. Poor, dear, loving women! And the men for whom they wept thinking them hard, cold and heartless!

This walk and confidence with Augusta Latrobe was the first secret kept from her father in Stella's transparent life. She felt as if she had somehow fallen from grace and had come into sin, and as if she should never be her old innocent self again, because she did not run, open-mouthed, to tell him all that she had done and learned. She would not even say that she had seen Augusta. She did not know why, but she could not volunteer even this apparently insignificant little statement. Nevertheless, when, later in the evening, he asked her where she had been? and whom she had seen? she would not conceal the bare bones of the fact if she still kept the heart of the circumstance hidden.

"I met Augusta Latrobe, and we went for a walk by the river-side," she answered.

Mr. Branscombe frowned.

"Of all the young women in the place she is the least desirable companion for you," he said slowly and emphatically. "I thought I had made this clear to you already, my child. However that may be, you will bear it in mind for the future, will you not? I do not approve of Mrs. Latrobe as your companion. This is the text on which you must embroider the various renderings of obedience and renunciation as occasions may occur. You understand me?"

"Yes, if you wish it, papa," faltered Stella. "It is so unfortunate that you do not like her," she added, plucking up so much courage of opposition as was contained in this plea. "She is so very kind and sweet! And I always remember that dearest mamma liked her so much, and was so sorry for her."

"As I once expressed myself to you, my dear Stella, your sainted mother, my good Matilda, had the unfortunate propensity for making pets of very undesirable people," said Mr. Branscombe significantly. "Of more than this objectionable young woman," he added with a cruel smile.

Stella said no more. She knew for whom her father meant the ricochet of this bullet aimed at Augusta; and Mr. Branscombe,

looking at her flushed face and a certain unexpressed fire of indignation in her blue eyes, wondered for a moment if it were in the possible ordaining of future things that his Star should becomeless radiant than heretofore—his docile child learn to be so far disobedient and recalcitrant as to encourage affections which he disallowed.

To make sure of her, at least for the present, he gave himself a great deal of trouble that evening; putting himself forth, as he so well knew how, as the embodied ideal of moral perfection and mental splendour; dazzling, as so often before, the mind made subservient to his by the long training of love and worship—till Stella felt that for papa—dear, dear papa—martyrdom itself would be not only right but easy.

It was a little trial to her on all sides, when next Sunday she and Augusta met in the church porch as the manner of the place was, and she had to speak to her with studied indifference. Mr. Branscombe had by now relaxed the severity of his mourning isolation; and he and Stella joined the Sunday church-door club according to the manner of the Highwoodites in general. As usual, he did not see the pretty widow clearly enough to shake hands with her, but he

watched his daughter while appearing to be occupied only with Mrs. Lyon and Hortensia. Augusta saw the whole position as clearly as if it had been laid down in black and white; and she knew what Stella was feeling and what were her difficulties. Wherefore she simply smiled and gave the girl's hand a friendly, secret squeeze which betrayed nothing and confessed all. Then she passed out into the damp fog with the noisy Doves, and troubled no one. But Stella had now a secret in her hitherto pure and crystalline life. She had established a private understanding with Augusta Latrobe whom her father disliked, and bade her dislike also and shrink from. And she, of all in Highwood, knew the secret of the young widow's life and what had been the moving cause of Sandro Kemp's sudden departure. It was a terrible burden for a girl who had never thought a thought nor done a deed with the faintest semblance of reserve or mystery. But fate is often very hard on us; and nothing pleases a malign fortune so much as to push us into actions uncongenial to our qualities. The truthful she forces into insincerity, the self-sacrificing have to appear selfish, the generous are thrust into misers' rags, and the gentle-hearted have to be judges and executioners.

And this malignity Stella experienced for the first time, when, the very soul of truth and candour as she was, she returned Augusta's hand-press with one as significant and warm, and neither wished nor allowed her father to see.

CHAPTER X.

"RUN DOWN."

"How ill Stella Branscombe is looking!"

This was the one common piece of news which each exchanged with each and all passed on to the next comer.

And she was, as they said, looking wretchedly ill. She was pale and thin, to the loss of all that lovely colouring, that graceful outline, so characteristic of her former self. Her eyes were too deeply sunk for one so young, and large blue circles were round the orbits. Her lips were too colourless, her hands too transparent, her step was too heavy, her bearing too listless. And she had, beside this want of life and spirit, a harassed expression in her face behind which could be read a certain kind of strange fear that set folks wondering why, and made them think of Mrs. Branscombe. So

that many supplemented their first piece of information with: "and how like she grows to her poor mother!" But, like that mother, she did not complain; and when asked somewhat significantly how she was, answered always in the same way: "Well—quite well, thank you."

Of course her father saw nothing of what was so visible to every one else. Devoted to elegance and art as he was, he shut his eyes to the prosaic conditions of indigestion and nervous exhaustion; and if forced to accept "delicacy" as a fact, accepted it only in its æsthetic aspect, and worked it up with images of spirits and angels and flowers and moonlight nights, of mist-wreaths on the hill and of snowflakes on the young grass. He could not by any possibility come down to the gross truths of physiology, and preferred his poetic rendering to any scientific interpretation that could be given.

It was rather an awkward position for Dr. Quigley. He saw, even more clearly than the rest, that Stella had "run down," but he was not called in to give his opinion; and professional etiquette is against a man's taking a patient by force or volunteering advice without leave asked or request made. Nevertheless, he

determined to break through that conventional etiquette so far as he might, and to do what he could to make Mr. Branscombe see things as they were, and do his duty when he had seen them. Accordingly, one bright, crisp, frosty day he went up to Rose Hill, and found father and daughter at home, with Hortensia Lyon to bear them company.

He was ushered into the studio where Mr. Branscombe received those visitors whose presence pleased him or whose praise he coveted. The room was hot, close, stifling; full of the odours of paint and varnish and heavily-scented greenhouse flowers, combined with the perfume of a small fountain of eau de Cologne, always playing on the table. The atmosphere and temperature alone were sufficient to account for any amount of pallor and lassitude in the girl, thought Dr. Quigley. Add to these the constant stooping over her desk and the strain of that unremitting mental servitude which was demanded of her by her father—and, thought the doctor again, what stuff it was when it was done!—and was it to be wondered at if Stella looked worn-out and run down as she did, and as if she would fall into a severe illness unless her present disastrous mode of life were interrupted?

Dr. Quigley loved this girl as if she had been his own. Had he not loved her mother as the one perfect woman of his life?—venerated her as the saint whose sufferings he had known without confession and whose martyrdom he had tried in vain to avert? Loving and pitying the child—loving, venerating and pitying the mother—his feelings for Mr. Branscombe were not of the most amiable kind. But he had to dissemble, like the stock villain of a Surrey melodrama; and though he could not stoop to the indignity of obtaining by flattery what would be denied to direct demand, still he, like every one else who had to influence Mr. Branscombe, was forced to finesse deeply that he might catch the trick. If he could have done as he would, he said to himself, he would have taken that old fop by the scruff of the neck and have thrust him into the midst of good useful prosaic parochial work, which would have necessitated open-air exercise and being somewhat hardly handled by his fellow-men. He would have taken Stella clear away from Highwood and her father, and would have sent her off to India by the next mail, with directions to be given into Cyril Ponsonby's keeping and married out of hand the day after her arrival. As for Hortensia, whose

character he understood to the echo, and whose feelings and motives were clearer to him than they were even to herself, he would have put an interdict on Rose Hill and Mr. Branscombe; he would have taken her out of her father's hands and given her into those of her mother, with instructions to be carried about to balls and parties and theatres and operas till some of this Puritanical nonsense had been knocked out of her and a little of the mildew of moral affectation had been rubbed off her silly little mind. But instead of all these strong and wholesome measures he had to dissemble in good truth, and to content himself with a mere "Pouf!" as he flung back his coat, wiped his forehead, fanned himself with his handkerchief, and said in a cheery fox-hunting kind of voice:

"You are terribly hot here, Mr. Branscombe! How stands the thermometer? And don't you find all this scent oppressive! It would give me headache in half an hour."

"I am a Son of the South," said Mr. Branscombe with a languid smile. "Warmth, flowers, perfumes—these are as necessary for my existence as the gross bread and meat of coarser organizations. I must have them if I am to live at all."

"But these two young ladies here are

daughters of the North; and this kind of thing is especially bad for Miss Stella," returned the doctor. "I understand now why she looks so pale and run down. She wants more exercise in the open air than she has, and a fresher and cooler atmosphere than this when she is in the house. Believe me, this is destruction for a young creature of her age. And, Miss Hortensia Lyon, you too have no business here! Why are you not running about the garden instead of sitting in the house such a day as this? Hothouses are bad rearing-grounds for the young."

"I like warmth and I adore hothouse flowers," said Hortensia primly.

Stella did not speak.

"Tut! what you like and what you adore don't come into the question," said Dr. Quigley with a good-humoured impatience of manner that matched her real annoyance well enough. "Both you young ladies, I say, have no business in such an atmosphere as this. You ought to be out now on the Broads with the rest. The water is frozen as thick as a millstone, and all Highwood is skating. Such a glorious day as this, it is a pity that you are not both out. What do you say, Miss Stella, eh?"

Stella glanced with a hurried look of inquiry

at her father. Hortensia turned her large eyes slowly to Mr. Branscombe, and fixed them on his face with that kind of worshipping humility which finds in obedience to superior power the greatest happiness of a loving life.

"I think that papa wants me," said Stella nervously.

"Not to your own disinclination, my child," said Mr. Branscombe loftily.

"If you like to go out, Stella, I can finish your copying," said Hortensia, a certain eagerness of hope mingled with an amount of reproach in her voice.

Always the faithful Abra!—always the constant incense-bearer!

"No, Miss Hortensia, you have no more right to be here than Miss Stella," said Dr. Quigley. "Let me advise you all—you, too, Mr. Branscombe, as well as the young ladies—put on your strong shoes, wrap up warm, go to the Broads where they are skating, and all three of you take a turn on the ice. That will put a little colour into your faces; for you are all as pallid as if you had not half a dozen red corpuscles among you! And upon my soul you will have to send for me before long if you do not mend the error of your ways! Let me advise you as a friend and a doctor too."

"If the ladies will," said Mr. Branscombe stiffly. "For myself, I am beyond the need of such vulgar considerations."

"As fresh air and exercise?" said Dr. Quigley. "Then you are beyond the conditions of ordinary humanity," he added with ill-concealed contempt.

"We do not wish it if you do not, papa," said Stella.

"It is so far nicer here!" echoed Hortensia, whose occupation was nothing more onerous than sitting by Mr. Branscombe, watching him paint and listening to the frothy rubbish which he offered and she accepted for poetry of the loftiest kind and morality of the sublimest cast.

"Tut!" said Dr. Quigley again. "Go and put on your bonnets, both of you—else, Miss Hortensia, so far as you are concerned, I shall be forced to say a word or two in your mother's ear which you will not like when it has to be translated for your benefit. I cannot have you all run to seed in this way. Come, Miss Stella, put that writing of yours away. It is a positive sin to waste such a day as this indoors."

"Shall we, papa?" asked Stella.

What a wicked girl she was to be so weary of her present life and endless absorption in

papa's beautiful work!—and how worse than wicked to be so tired of Hortensia Lyon! Hortensia was right to reproach her with those grave reproving eyes. Yes; she was wicked, and her friend knew it.

"I wish no sacrifice of young lives. Go, my dears," said Mr. Branscombe majestically; and Stella felt the burden of her sin in his tone as well as in Hortensia's eyes.

"Stella, you are inexplicable! I cannot understand you," said the little Puritan with frank, ungodly temper, as they went upstairs.

"No?" returned Stella wearily. "Sometimes I cannot understand myself."

Few people indeed can, when they come to the state in which she was—utterly weary with her present conditions yet without energy enough to know what she would like better. She only knew that she was tired of copying papa's poetry and music; that she was tired of being always in the studio; that she was tired of seeing Hortensia Lyon day after day, day after day;—Hortensia always, and no one else; and that, above all, she was tired of that odd jargon and jumble of words which were always sounding in her ears and never entering into her mind, never giving her a new thought, a definite fact, a clear image, or a cheerful sensa-

tion. She was so tired of it all and wished that she could go to sleep with her dear mother! But, save this wish, which was not to be called an active desire, she did not know what it was that she wanted in the place of that which she had. "Run down" to the extent of patient despair; and she so young and once so near the green glades of Paradise!

"You must look after that child of yours," said Dr. Quigley, when the girls had left. "She is going the way of her mother; and unless you look out, by George! Branscombe, she will slip through your fingers before you know where you are!"

He spoke with intentional abruptness and coarseness of tone, thinking that this old fop had need of some smart blow if that rhinoceros' hide of his self-conceit were to be made to feel.

"Oh, you doctor fellows are always on the look out for 'cases,'" said Mr. Branscombe irritably. "My daughter's health is perfect; simply perfect. She has never had a day's indisposition of any kind, and seems to me to be in the most satisfactory condition possible. If you had said that *I* wanted looking to I should have understood it. Had you even said that Miss Lyon's constitutional fragility might give those who

love her cause for uneasiness, that also I should have understood. But, my dear sir!" here he smiled in a superior and sarcastic way; "Miss Branscombe is simply superb—in perfect condition, mind and body; and I thank God for it!" he added, piously raising his eyes to the ceiling.

"Now, see here, Mr. Branscombe," said Dr. Quigley; "it is no business of mine to warn you—don't you see? My business would be to let your daughter go on as she is now, when I should have a 'case,' as you call it, on my hands and a pocketful of fees as the result. But I don't want this case, and I would rather never receive another fee again than one for Stella Branscombe's illness. So I give you fair and friendly warning. If you do not loosen the curb a little—provide the girl with some kind of amusement necessary for her age—force her to go more into the fresh air than she does,—make her take exercise and give up this eternal poring over her desk in this hot, heavily-loaded atmosphere, Stella will die—die, sir, so surely as her mother died before her. I do not mince matters, you see; for I am in earnest. The girl is going the same way as her mother, and"—significantly—"from the same cause."

"God bless my soul, what can I do with her!" cried Mr. Branscombe angrily. "She

has her appointed duties and she must fulfil them. You are alarming me without cause, Dr. Quigley. She is not in the bad way you make out. I am; but she is not—and I cannot lose her valuable co-operation. Everything will go by the board if I do!"

"As to that, take a secretary," said Dr. Quigley. "Rather a dozen secretaries than lose your daughter."

"You startle me, you distress me, you disturb me," said Mr. Branscombe. "How can I take a secretary? Why not advise me to take a white elephant at once! Where shall I find a secretary? How can I introduce a young man with a rumpled shirt-front and inky fingers into the penetralia of my establishment? He will steal my ideas and fall in love with my daughter."

"In all probability he will do neither one nor the other," said Dr. Quigley brusquely. "But the difficulties of the position are not my affair. My duty is to warn you, as I have done, that your daughter's health is giving way to such an extent—she is running down so rapidly—that unless some radical change is made in her mode of life I will not answer for the consequences. Ah! here they come!" he cried, as the girls entered the room. "Now for a brisk good walk

to the Broads, and a tumble or two on the ice to whip up the circulation!"

"Miss Branscombe and Miss Lyon are not a couple of milkmaids, sir," said Mr. Branscombe with haughty irritation.

"And a deuced sight better for both if they were," returned the doctor—his chin in the air and his keen eyes full of fire. That fellow's airs and affectation always tried his patience, as he said to himself. That such a selfish windbag as this should have been the husband of that saint and the father of this sweet child! "Ah, well! Providence has queer ways of its own," said Dr. Quigley as he turned from this stately, refined and artificial house and drew a deep breath when well out in the sunshine and the crisp cold air of this bright winter's day.

As his daughter and his young worshipper had to "leave off work," by orders which the master of Rose Hill was too wise in his generation to disobey, it was not in the nature of things that Mr. Branscombe should stay behind and alone. He therefore made himself fit to bear the inclemency of this frightful weather, as he put it; and in his fur-lined coat, with its deep collar and cuffs of Astrachan, his broad-leaved, Rembrandt-looking hat, and beaver gloves, he was really glad in heart to

have the opportunity of showing himself. "He certainly was a handsome fellow," he said to himself, as he pulled his hair into festoons and curls from beneath his hat and settled himself with precision everywhere, from his head to his feet. Certainly a handsome fellow, now and always; "Handsome Fred Branscombe" to the last! So Hortensia thought, and so Stella thought too; and the three set out to walk according to the doctor's directions, for the sake of that health and "tone" which burnt away like tinder and was dissipated like smoke in the life and atmosphere of the studio.

And as they were going Mr. Branscombe. taking the suggestion as his own, told Stella that he was going to lighten her labours by engaging a secretary, so that she might have more time to amuse herself—he said this with a strange kind of emphasis—and more opportunity for fresh air and exercise.

"But, papa——" she began.

"Let me be your secretary, Mr. Branscombe," interrupted Hortensia. "Nothing would make me so happy, and I am sure I could do it with a little practice. I should soon be able to do almost as well as Stella."

"Quite," said Mr. Branscombe emphatically.

"If papa thinks it too trying for me would it

not be so for you too, Hortensia?" said Stella a little hurriedly.

She was not jealous by nature—not in the least; but the thought of Hortensia at Rose Hill every day by right did undeniably startle her, and not pleasantly.

"Hortensia would put goodwill into the work," said Mr. Branscombe cruelly.

"Oh, papa! does that mean that I do not?" cried poor Stella, her eyes filling with tears.

"That means nothing against you, my dear," said Mr. Branscombe. "It means only praise of your good little friend. Is commendation of the one blame of the other? Fie!"

"No—but——" began the girl.

"No—but——. But I know who is a very silly, jealous little girl," said Mr. Branscombe with forced jocularity; "so do not let us have any more 'No, buts.' If your good little friend is willing to undertake the office I shall be only too proud to accept her services. Between you both I may hope to get something done."

And as by this time they had reached the Broads further conversation on the subject was impossible.

In the evening, Hortensia broached her notable scheme to her parents. She was going to undertake Mr. Branscombe's copying for him

—to be in fact, she said, his secretary; as Stella evidently did not care for the work which was just what she herself would like.

"Mr. Branscombe's what, my little maid?" asked her father, opening his eyes.

"His secretary," she repeated demurely.

He flung himself back in his chair and laughed aloud.

"Not if I know it!" he said. "You can go and see Stella as often as you like. There is no kind of objection to that; but you won't go on any such wild-goose errand as being the old gentleman's secretary. If he wants one let him hire one. They are to be had for the asking. Let him take Ran. He writes a capital hand, and it is just the work he would like."

"Randolph would scarcely do for Mr. Branscombe's secretary," said Hortensia with the daintiest little accent of sarcasm. "He is a dear good boy but I do not think he is quite up to *that* work."

"No? Not quite down to it you mean, my little maid," said her father, laughing again. "The old gentleman's verses are rather feeble stuff I must say for such a young son of Anak to tackle. Still, it will give him something to do, and he might be at a worse crank if he

could scarcely find a weaker. At all events, I will propose it; and if the cat jumps that way I will write to Ran, who would not say No. Whatever happens however, I will not have any nonsense about you, do you understand? No secretaryships, my little maid, for Mr. Branscombe or any one else."

"But why not, papa?" asked Hortensia loftily. "I could not be better employed! I could not be doing anything that would refine and elevate me more than this."

"Stuff and nonsense, my dear," he answered with good-humoured impatience. "You might be making a pudding in the kitchen or casting up the weekly bills for your mother; and that would be far more elevating, and a deal more useful, than copying out that queer rubbish which our friend at Rose Hill calls poetry. And whether or no, you don't do it, do you hear? So now there's no more to be said; and go and sing me 'Cherry Ripe,' like a dear."

But Hortensia broke down before she had got half through the first verse, and cherries turned to tears in her song.

"Why, how now!" said her father. "What is this, my little maid? You are not getting so that you cannot be thwarted, even in an absurd fancy like this, without showing silly

tempers that a child should be ashamed of? Is this the right reward for all the love and indulgence with which you have been treated from the day of your birth up to now? Is this really my little maid who has grown so peevish and unpleasant?"

"I have always told you, William, that you spoil the child, and that some day you would find it out," said his wife irritably.

In general, her interference when things went wrong between father and daughter, only brought herself into disgrace; but this evening her husband felt somehow unable to cope with Hortensia's latest folly. There was something in it that puzzled and confounded him, and he was not sorry to give the reins for the moment to his wife.

"Well, take her and manage her your own way," he said, also irritably. "I think the very mischief gets into you women so that you do not know what you want nor what you ail! I wash my hands of you both, and you may go your own way for what I care. But tears or no tears, Hortensia," he added severely, "you do not make yourself Mr. Branscombe's secretary, as you choose to call it. There is something in all this that I neither like nor understand."

On which he flung himself out of the draw-

ing-room and went to his own study in a pet—the most good-natured father in the world now really annoyed with his idolized little maid!

"Now, you have vexed papa in earnest," said Hortensia's mother, also severely.

She was not sorry to have this opportunity for unrestricted censure. Her husband stood so sturdily between her and her maternal right as well as duty — shall we add pleasure? — of rebuke, that she felt quite comfortable in having thus delegated to her her own natural task of moral castigation.

"Your temper is getting really too bad to be borne, Hortensia," she went on to say. "And I foresee that you will weary even papa, who has always been so kind and indulgent to you. One silliness after the other, and tears and sobs if you are checked in a single desire! Your papa has spoilt you—that is just the truth of it!"

Hortensia made no reply. She only wept with a little more demonstration.

"Why are you crying, Hortensia? In the name of patience what is there to cry about?" said the mother sharply.

"I should like to be of use to Stella," sobbed Hortensia with unconscious hypocrisy.

Her mother looked at her narrowly.

"I think you go up to Rose Hill a great deal too much as it is," she said. "I do not approve of these tremendous friendships. They are unwholesome, and always come to bad ends. I shall try to make papa forbid this incessant running up to Mr. Branscombe's. It is too much."

"No, mamma, it is not. There is no reason why I should not go," said Hortensia with sobbing energy. "It is the only pleasure I have. Stella is my only friend."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Lyon dryly. "Then I think it would be just as well if you made a friend of some one else—Mrs. Latrobe, for instance, or those good-natured Pennefather girls. It is not wise to be so very exclusive."

"Mrs. Latrobe! the Pennefathers!" said Hortensia scornfully if still tearfully. "Not two ideas among them!"

"Perhaps they are none the worse for that," said Mrs. Lyon tartly.

She had about one idea and a half on her own account, and she rather despised intellect in women as something unfeminine and inimical to good housekeeping. But she said no more, and Hortensia did not answer. Mrs. Lyon was not remarkable for wisdom, but she had sense enough to hold her peace and not give life to the special thought which had come into her

mind more than once of late. She held her peace even to her husband; saying only, when they discoursed on their daughter's latest craze that night:

"You never do take my advice, William, but I most earnestly advise you to put a stop to this perpetual going up to Rose Hill. It is getting to be too much. And I do not like the idea of Randolph's being mixed up in Mr. Branscombe's affairs. It will keep up what is a very unwholesome excitement with Hortensia."

"Stuff, Cara!" said Mr. Lyon; "the child must have some amusement, and Stella Branscombe is the safest friend she could have. And it is the very thing for Ran. And if I can manage it, I will."

"Then you'll repent it," said Mrs. Lyon sharply.

"When I do I shall not blame you, Cara," retorted her husband.

They always wrangled over their daughter, and never about anything else. But Hortensia had been their one steady bone of contention ever since she began to talk and ask for sugar, which her mother forbade and her father gave. As time went on, and more than sugar came between them, the quarrels were graver

in meaning and more frequent in occurrence; quarrels wherein the mother had the better sense and worse method, and where the father was amiably wrong and lovingly mischievous. If only their little maid had been content to be good, and had not aspired to be superior!

CHAPTER XI.

HIS SECRETARY.

It all came about as Mr. Lyon had proposed. Randolph Mackenzie was formally engaged as Mr. Branscombe's secretary, with a salary to make things business-like and to put them on a mutually honourable footing; and Stella was thus free to find such amusement as was to be had in the empty drawing-room and leafless garden. But this was better than her close confinement in that stifling studio; and at least she could now read other things beside her father's poetry, practise other pieces of music, or work with some sort of profitable earnestness, not interrupted every moment by calls on her attention which made her days like so many scattered bits of a puzzle without order or sequence, without meaning or completeness. Both poetry and music were of course grand

and lovely; but she hardly dared confess it to herself—indeed she would have held it for sin had she acknowledged it—how unutterably weary she had become of them and what wonderful emptiness she found in them now!

This institution of the secretary, and the choice of the person made to fill it, pleased every one but Mrs. Lyon. Mr. Branscombe, despising Randolph personally and looking on him as an intellectual grub within which the potential butterfly was so dwarfed as to be practically dead, was yet gratified by the clearness of the grub's handwriting, by the accuracy of his copy, and by the good-nature with which he bore rebuffs. He was glad too, to have a daily and recognized link with that pretty little devotee whose worship was so sweet to his sense of superiority and in whose mental culture he took so much delight; and he was proud to be able to say, "My Secretary," when he bid for his neighbours' praise by detailing his various achievements. Stella was glad to have Cyril's faithful friend and confidant so near to her that snatches of stolen talk on the lives of young civil servants in India were possible, if, under all the conditions of the case, not very profitable. Randolph was glad to be able to watch over Cyril's interests—against

whom?—and to sun himself daily in the light of Cyril's star, and because Cyril's—only because Cyril's—his own also. Hortensia was glad that her elegant idol should put his graceful hand to the work of tilling her cousin's tardy soul—that work which she had taken on herself, and which she had found so almost impossible owing to the clayey nature of the soil. Mr. Lyon, who had his own views in keeping Randolph close under his eyes, was glad that his wish had been carried into execution and that he had found folks as reasonable as he had hoped. Only Mrs. Lyon refused to add her note to the chord of congratulation, and always maintained that it was a mistake, and time would show that it was when too late for reparation.

Of course the neighbours laughed at the affectation of the whole affair, and ridiculed the idea of that old fop wanting a secretary at all—as if he had anything to do that was of the very least importance. But then people are so ill-natured to merit! The jays peck so enviously at the nightingale!

Two results came about by this engagement of the secretary—Stella's lines of liberty were enlarged at all borders so generously as to take in even Augusta Latrobe without rebuke, and

Mr. Branscombe's fount of creative energy ran curiously dry in Randolph's presence. It was not that he feared anything like hostile criticism from his grub. He would as soon have looked for a repetition of the miracle which set Balaam wondering. But he missed the stimulus of loving flattery, and he felt like a man who has been walking on a pair of stilts when suddenly brought flat-footed to the ground. In consequence of this dryness in the fount, there was a great deal more out-of-door life than hitherto, and the four friends were to be met riding and walking about the frozen country to an extent heretofore unknown to hothouse-living Finery Fred. They did not do much in the way of driving, which naturally he would have preferred as his mode of exercise when forced out of that indolent activity of his studio life. It was no pleasure to him to go in the brougham alone with Stella; or in the carriage with Hortensia opposite to him and that big, clumsy cousin of hers by his side and opposite to Stella; or even with the two girls alone. His pleasure was in unrestricted converse with his little devotee alone, and in cultivating her mental garden free of bystanders and listeners. If he could not have this he would not have the rest. So they went out in a party of four; and

Mr. Branscombe always managed to draw off with Hortensia while Randolph was left with Cyril's Star—and, because Cyril's, his own as well.

Thus, for bosom friends as they were supposed to be—friends so near and dear and so mutually necessary as to excuse her perpetual desertion of home and its duties with the little Puritan—the two girls were very little together; and the work of making Randolph's tardy soul went on at a snail's pace.

What Stella lost in Hortensia however, she gained in Hortensia's cousin—"Brother Randolph." Yes, he was just that—her dear, dear, good, trustworthy brother; unselfish, unexacting, loving her as much as she wanted to be loved and not a hair's-breadth less or more; the mere echo of her wish; the copy of her attitude; a reflection; a repetition; in no wise active for his own part, nor with feelings, ideas, sentiments of which she did not set the exact lines. That was the unspoken theory in force between Cyril's friend and Cyril's former fiancée; and both believed it to be eminently workable and standing four square on all sides. It is one of the most delightful of all the theories which women make for themselves; though alas! one of the most slippery and unstable.

Nevertheless it pleases the eye till the inevitable day comes when card-houses must perforce tumble into ruins, when ropes of sea-sand fall to dust, when iridescent bubbles vanish into thin air, leaving only a tear behind. Meantime, and before the dawn of that inevitable day, it serves as a dream and an amusement, and holds the ground against others perhaps less innocent.

Randolph's brotherhood was a delightful addition to Stella's arid life; and Stella's sisterhood was even more delightful to him. How pleasant it was to see her blue eyes brighten and glisten with such manifest affection when he came into the room!—to see her look at him as if he were really her brother, and something of her very own! It was all for Cyril, of course—all her affection for him, all his devotion to her—all for the lover from whom she had separated herself, for the chum whose lapsed interests he was so sedulously guarding. He was always telling himself this, as a piece of information specially needful to be planted fathoms deep in his mind; but he rejoiced in this reflected affection, this vicarious happiness, as much as if it had been because of himself alone; and one day when she said to him: "How glad I am that dear papa thought of making you his

secretary, Randolph! I do not know what I should do without you now!" he felt his heart swell within him with such a sudden rush of joy as to be almost pain.

That fraternal relation was certainly one of the most charming things in the world, and he was one of the luckiest fellows in the world. Hortensia and Stella, two such darling girls, both like sisters to him, and both so sweet and good as to make him like a brother!—it was the happiest time of his life; and his charity covered even Mr. Branscombe, while his happiness touched his matutinal employment of writing in a fair hand, and with accurate divisions, words of which he knew no more the ultimate meaning than if they had been modern Greek or Venetian patois.

But what cold, coarse minds people have! What a hateful young ass that Bob Pennefather was when he said to him, Randolph, one day: "I say, Ran, you'll get to be spoons on Stella Branscombe if you don't look out!"

How willingly he would have given the fellow a caning on the spot for the brutality of his suspicion and the insolence of putting it into words! "Spoons" indeed! as if one can be "spoons" on one's sister, one's Star, on the treasure which one is guarding for one's friend.

"Spoons!" Well, he would never be "spoons" on Gip or Pip, so the Pennefathers need not trouble themselves about him; and he would take care to make them understand that, and give them a wide berth for the future. "Spoons?" "spoons," on Stella Branscombe? Why not on Hortensia as well? The phrase fretted him like a sore and he could not forget it. He was a slow kind of creature in most things, and when he got an idea into his head he kept it for a long time and bothered himself more than was in any way necessary.

And then even Mrs. Latrobe, whom else he liked so much, even she must touch his susceptibilities, and that with a somewhat cruel hand. Why did she say to him one day with such marked significance — "I do not think that Stella Branscombe will ever love again. She is one of the single flowering kind—one bloom and no after blossom"? Why did she look at him so fixedly when she said this, and lay such an odd emphasis on her words? Of course, Stella would never love again. He, Randolph, could not love her as he did if he did not believe her to be absolutely loyal. Fancy Stella marrying Jemmy Pennefather or one of the Cowley boys, or Sandro Kemp, or any other man alive! It was a desecration to imagine such a thing.

No, she was staunch and loyal to the death; and he was her brother, because Cyril was his friend and had been her lover.

This was the staple of his morning and evening reflections and orisons while he prowled round her like a faithful watch-dog whose fidelity was incorruptible and whose watch was unremitting. Thus the time wore on, and the four oddly-matched companions kept their respective bubbles afloat, and their card-houses in the most admirable appearance of stable equilibrium.

One day Randolph's honest face had an expression in it of more than ordinary preoccupation. When he came into the room he looked at Stella as people do who have something to tell in private which they do not wish others to hear in public; while they betray the existence of a secret as plainly as if they carried it printed on a placard. He shuffled and fidgeted, and turned his eyes so continually on his employer's daughter that Mr. Branscombe himself noticed the uncomfortable uneasiness of his grub, and wondered what the deuce ailed the creature. Calling Stella to him, and fixing his spectacles rather low on his nose while he looked at her critically, his chin well up in the air, he said in a dry tone:

"My dear Stella, what is there about you to-day different from your ordinary usage? I see you attract Mr. Randolph's attention to a distracting extent. Excuse the pun. It was too obvious to be allowed to slip. What is it, Mr. Randolph, that you find rare and unusual in my daughter, hey? I see nothing."

"I am not aware of anything, sir," said Randolph, colouring like a great girl.

"Then may I ask why you gaze so intently at Miss Branscombe?" demanded Stella's father, looking over his glasses at his secretary.

"Did I look at her more than usual?" stammered Randolph.

"I think so," said Mr. Branscombe with suave severity. "If indeed you see nothing as you say on which to comment in Miss Branscombe's appearance, we will resume our interrupted occupation. My dear Stella, perhaps you will be good enough to take this Nocturne into the drawing-room where you can practise it more at your ease than here. I and Mr. Randolph will join you at luncheon. Thus I give you the whole morning for yourself and your amusement, free of all but this small duty" —with a curl on his thin lips that cut Stella to the heart. "By the way," he continued, as his daughter with a very pale face was taking up

the music; "perhaps your little friend will give us the pleasure of her society at luncheon. She promised yesterday that she would come in her hat and habit to take a ride—if you should feel disposed to come. At your own pleasure, of course. Your pleasure before all other considerations," again curling his thin lips.

He had never forgiven Dr. Quigley's interference in his household affairs, and revenged on Stella the indignity of which she had been the occasion.

"I shall be delighted, papa," said Stella in a constrained voice.

She was not only hurt at her dear papa's sarcastic smile and double-edged words, but she thought it odd that Hortensia had said nothing to her yesterday about coming up to luncheon or going out for a ride—Randolph on his side thinking it odd that she had said nothing to him that morning. But no comment was made; and, feeling herself dismissed, Stella went into the drawing-room to practise the new Nocturne which was written in three flats and began with a chord in sharps.

She wondered as she stumbled her way among these musical tombs of harmony what was amiss with Randolph to-day; and then why her father had got into such an uncomfortable way

of speaking to her. Something, she did not know what, was changing him towards her; some strange mildew of coldness was creeping over his tone and manner to her; some vague barrier of displeasure was slowly arising in his heart against her. She felt herself in silent disgrace and as if in some sort shut out from his affection, ever since Randolph had been engaged as his secretary. Yet why? She loved him as much as she had always loved him, and would again, were it necessary, sacrifice her own happiness for his, as she had already done. She had done nothing that should have displeased him. And yet—was she quite whole-hearted in saying this?—seeing that she was so undutiful as to have got tired of her work for him—so wicked as to have wearied of his art to such an extent that she could no longer find beauty in his poetry, melody in his music, or charm in his pictures. Was this the meaning of it all? Had he seen her naughtiness; and was it then, her fault, not his, that he was displeased?

Meanwhile she stumbled over the notes of his latest Nocturne, while the tears gathered round her heart, as she hoped, so piteously, that papa was not turning against her; for then, what should she have left? Papa no longer caring for her, and Cyril parted from her for ever—

life would be little worth having should the day ever come when that beloved father should steel his heart against her and shut her out from his affections! And mingled with this piteous hope was a wish as strong if not so pathetic, that Hortensia Lyon would not come here so often, and that she would not get about papa and flatter him so much when she did come! There was something in it all that pained and revolted her more than she could say. She did not know why; but it did. Was it because she was jealous?

What a wicked girl indeed she was getting! How she wished that she had a director who might give her good counsel and bring back her straying soul into obedience to the higher law and the ways of faithful self-sacrifice and suppression. Yet there was no one to whom she could open her heart. Brother Randolph, though so good, was so dense in all mental matters!—he never understood states of feeling. And Augusta Latrobe, though so sweet, was so fearfully reasonable! And Stella wanted some one who would be as wise as Augusta and as good as Randolph, but with more comprehension of moral difficulties than the one and with more enthusiasm for high-flying virtue than the other. In fact she wanted her Mother;

and when she thought of that sweet faithful guide and love she laid her head down on the piano and sobbed, as her accompaniment to her father's soulless Nocturne. And yet she did not wish her back again. She had begun to understand now something of the hidden secret of her life.

Merry or sad, the time passes somehow, and at the luncheon-hour, Hortensia rode up to the door, equipped for the ride on which she and her elegant idol had agreed yesterday. It was against her will, against her better and wiser self, but Stella could not help being cool rather than demonstrative to her friend, who, as if to make up for some secret treachery, was more than ordinarily caressing and affectionate to her. Stella felt that she was "an awful wretch," as the modern phrase runs; but it was stronger than herself. She could not!—and she held back in an odd, angular, uncomfortable way which Hortensia took care not to notice. The relations between the two girls were getting decidedly strained; but they would last for some time yet without breaking. Girlish friendships go through a great deal of strain before they come to the breaking-point and it takes a century of quarrels before all the gold embroidery gets worn off the fabric.

The luncheon however was singularly silent; every one was more or less ill at ease and acting a part, so that the ride came as a decided relief and the four set off with curious alacrity. They went for some time all in a line, the two girls in the middle—Mr. Branscombe by his daughter and Randolph flanking Hortensia; but, as soon as they had passed through the village, Mr. Branscombe and Hortensia found themselves together, leading the way down a narrow lane where only two could ride abreast. And thus the "brother and sister" remained together.

"I wanted so much to speak to you, Miss Stella," Randolph began so soon as they were alone.

"I saw there was something. What is it?" she answered eagerly, her heart beating fast with a strange kind of expectation, as if she were afraid of some misfortune yet hopeful for some great gain.

"I have had a letter from Cyril," he said.

She looked into his face, her own as white as the linen band about her throat.

"Yes? What does he say? Is he well? Is he happy? Does he tell you anything about his life and his work? Does he ask after his friends at home?"

She spoke breathlessly, her questions falling confusedly over each other.

"He asks after all at Highwood," said Randolph. "He does not speak much of himself. Poor old fellow, I do not think he is very happy. How can he be?"

"Is he well?" she asked again.

"I suppose so. He says nothing to the contrary."

"Did he tell you what he was doing?"

"Only pig-sticking and looking out for tiger-shooting."

"Oh, that is dangerous!" she said with a shudder. "Did he say nothing else?"

"No."

"Not how he liked his work?"

"No."

"Did he tell you who were his friends out there?"

"No; oh, yes! the Whites: a Major and Mrs. White."

"Did he speak of any one here?"

"No."

"Not of one of us by name?"

She asked this in a lowered voice, hating herself for her want of dignity; but this too was stronger than herself.

"No," answered Randolph in a lowered voice and with a terribly distressed face, for he knew that this was the core of the whole matter;

and that his negatives hitherto, reducing that letter as they did to a mere fact shorn of circumstances, were as nothing compared to this.

"Ah! he has forgotten us! He is right!" said Stella with irrepressible passion.

But if right, why did she burst into that tempest of weeping?—a tempest wherein all pride and reticence were swept away as straws in a Highland "spate." It was worse than folly to weep for what was not only natural but right! All the same, she did, and as if her heart would have broken with its pain.

Randolph's anguish equalled hers. She wept for Cyril's forgetfulness of the old bonds which she herself had sundered, and his eyes were dim because of her distress. But what can you do when you are on horseback in a narrow lane? He was only able to exhort her to quietness and self-control. He could not take her to his heart as he longed to do, comforting her as a brother might. He could only say: "Don't! don't, Miss Stella! Please don't cry! please don't!" as if hearts can break and piece themselves together again at will, and a girl who has made her own unhappiness can turn her tears on and off like so much bath-water at her pleasure!

She cried so passionately however, and was so thoroughly overcome, that Randolph jumped off his horse and stopped hers; then took her from the saddle and set her on a fallen tree by the way side. And then he knelt on the hard and frozen ground before her, and said in a voice which brought her back to herself by very surprise of its intensity:

"Do you want to break my heart too, Miss Stella?"

No; she did not want to break his heart; assuredly not; her good, true, loving brother! What should she do without him? He was all that she had of her very own now that she had not Cyril and that the strange mildew of coldness was creeping over her father's manner towards her! No; she did not want to break his heart; and therefore, to avoid this terrible contingency she controlled herself into the wise and patient Stella of her normal state; dried her eyes—"pulled herself together," as he said—and mounting her horse rode off at a brisk pace to get within reasonable distance of Mr. Branscombe and Hortensia. But when they all joined forces again the lids of those big, blue eyes told Hortensia in unmistakable language that Stella had been crying—crying to cousin Randolph; and about what?

The question a little disturbed Mr. Branscombe's devotee; perhaps because her own conscience was not quite so clear as it ought to have been. She drew away from her idol and put her horse's head in line with Stella's.

"What is the matter, Stella? You have been crying," she said with a reproving air.

Girls are always hard on the tears of other girls; and though they may do a good deal in that way themselves, they generally hold themselves justified in showing the most virtuous indignation against the like weakness in their sisters.

"Nothing is the matter," said Stella with evident constraint.

Hortensia was the last person whom she could take into her confidence in this matter! Fancy confessing to *her* that she had cried bitterly because Cyril Ponsonby had not asked after his old love by name and with many questions!

"It is not fair to shut me out of your confidence as you do—not friendly, not what I deserve," said Hortensia, a little too warmly perhaps for the living saint for whom she somewhat posed.

"*You* have no right to reproach *me*, Hortensia! You make mysteries and secrets enough

on your own side!" said Stella with refreshing indignation.

On this Hortensia turned her horse's head away in dudgeon, and dropped behind on pretence of asking cousin Randolph the name of a book which she had not read and of which he had never heard.

This strain was certainly increasing, the strand was getting thinner, the embroidery more bare, and the hidden split was threatening to show itself too plainly for future politic ignoring. When an elderly man, father to the one and ideal to the other, is the only bond of union between two girls of the same age, things are in a bad way; and the very bond itself makes them no better.

CHAPTER XII.

A NEW THREAD.

Christmas came, and with it the interrupted innings of that objectionable family which owned those noisy Doves as its most prominent members. The two brothers left in England came down for the vacation, and the Cowley boys came as well; the startling costumes devised and executed in the dark days of autumn were brought to light and publicity—to the scandalization of certain unfriendly critics of whom old Mrs. Morshead was the chief; and the rousing reveille at Sherrardine woke up Highwood to full and fast activity. Fortunately the weather continued fair and frosty, and skating was the order of the day, while dances and round games, snap-dragon and charades made the evenings "go" in such sort that the fun might be said to overflow at all

four corners. The whole place was astir with the gaieties of the season; and the example set by the family at Sherrardine seemed infectious and to pass from house to house, like measles or whooping-cough, in orderly succession.

Even Mr. Branscombe was not proof against the contagion of this gay epidemic. Having already greatly relaxed the severity of his mourning, he relaxed it now still more because of the season and its claims. He could not, he said, throw the chill of his gloom over this joyous time; and he thought he showed his devotion to his sainted Matilda best by doing that which would be most congenial to her sentiments were she able to direct him vivâ voce. His daughter, his dear Stella, must not be too much shut up. It was touching and pretty to see her wish for isolation from the crowd, and her desire for quiet companionship with him alone. Dear child! she lived but in his sight! And of course that would be his wish also, as it was his sole source of pleasure; but he must do violence to himself that he might do good to her. Therefore, he and his daughter would accept whatever invitations were afloat; and they even went to Sherrardine, where naturally one so elegant and artistic as Mr. Branscombe had no business to go.

But that is the worst of a country society, he said, when discussing these things with Hortensia Lyon. If you go to one place you must to all, else you make enemies by showing favour. It was all for his daughter, he repeated—to the world with bland and painful resignation; to Hortensia with an appearance of only half-concealed chagrin, chagrin very cleverly concealed and very artfully displayed—all for her pale cheeks, peaked shoulders, blue-encircled eyes, and the health which had run down so visibly, but to which the hidden disease had not yet given its name.

So it might be. We have no right to look behind a man's words for his motives; but for an unwilling sacrifice, as he made himself out to be, Mr. Branscombe was certainly what the Pennefather girls called "awfully jolly," though he was so "awfully stilted and humbugging and affected," as well. Still, he was decidedly jolly; and any one would have said that he enjoyed his sacrifice like the rest of them.

All this however, did poor Stella no appreciable good. Though not apparently so much depressed, she was just as pale and thin as ever; and not even a half romping turn at "Sir Roger de Coverley" did more than bring the colour into her face for just so long as the

exertion lasted. When her breath came back the soft pink roses in her cheeks faded into the normal pallor of her present condition, and she looked even more fragile and diaphanous than before. Dr. Quigley was looking after her in his own way, but silently. He was waiting for spring-time, and beyond; waiting until sundry things should declare themselves more plainly than at present, before he again took on himself the unauthorized direction of events. He was waiting and watching vigilantly; and for more things than one. But he took no one into his confidence, and the revelations conveyed by those keen eyes and that active brain remained his own property only, shared and suspected by none.

"Supreme!" That was Valentine Cowley's present working word—the traction-engine which drew the whole verbal load, the camel which was laden with all the separate straws of admiration. Everything of which he approved was "supreme;" and this Christmas-time Stella Branscombe, who had always been nice, was supremest of the supreme. The truth was, Valentine Cowley had suddenly become a new man. He had fallen under influences which, as he said, had completed his being. To his former magnificent muscularity and worship of manly

strength he had added a passion for blue china, Queen Anne architecture, Morris's papers, Rossetti's poems, Ruskin's prose, half-tones in blue and green, earnestness in men and tender stillness in women—with a sublime contempt for trade, luxury, the doctrine of evolution and the fourth dimension. He had met a certain man of mark—one of the leaders of this school—just as he was casting his boyish mental skin and becoming more manly and reflective; just as he was slipping like a hermit-crab from one intellectual shell to another, getting tired of play and casting about for "work" and "his life's meaning." And this man had cultivated him on his own lines and made him, intellectually, a new creature—having, as he said, completed his being, leaving him his muscles but adding thereto reverence for art and knowledge of the true meaning of poetry.

Having thus gone past the point when noisy hoydens were his chosen chums, Val had entered on the higher platform of refinement and idealistic womanhood, of saints in their sweetness, of ladies in their grace, even of blossoms tenderly blighted and delicate to the verge of sickliness. And Stella, who was just as beautiful now in the days of her pallor as she had been in those of her freshness—though beautiful in a different

way, and with more soul about her, said Val—seemed to him just the kind of thing that he liked best of all, and just the person for whose appreciation nature had fitted him. Gip and Pip were still awfully jolly and awfully nice; the best girls in the world, and with the least nonsense about them that could be; but Stella Branscombe touched a higher level than they could ever aspire to reach. Gip and Pip were of the arrested, non-developing class, while for Stella all manner of spiritual progress might be expected. And Gip and Pip laughed too much and too loud, and had eyes far too bright and bold and wandering for his taste as it stood now, while Stella's sweet, low, tender tones and mild, sad, steadfast eyes seemed to him the very perfection of their kind.

Wherefore, after they had met once on the ice, and dipped their fingers together into the blazing brandy of snap-dragon, and laughed at the ghastliness gathered round the blue light made of the salt so liberally ladled in—after they had waltzed till they were tired, and acted lovers in a charade—Valentine pronounced her "supreme;" and made Georgie Pennefather free of his verdict.

To which Georgie, laughing as if it were a small battery of guns fired off in salute, said

in a shrill voice: "Why, Val! are you going to be one of those duffers who go in for washed-out faces and sentimental voices? I thought you had more nous in you than that! Stella Branscombe is all very well in her way; but her way was never too much of a good thing, and now it is less so than ever. I would as soon make love to a ghost at once, if I were a man, as to her. I don't know indeed but that the ghost would be the better fun of the two!"

"You incorrigible young person!" said Valentine, his gaiety a little forced.

"And you incomprehensible individual!" retorted Georgie, her rattling laugh as little really spontaneous as his smile.

A little off-room at Sherrardine opened on to the drawing-room, where, at this moment, dancing was going on. Gip and Pip always called it, in their audacious way: "The spooning-room;" and held themselves free to rally any one who might be found therein, and to assume whatever they chose beyond the patent fact of occupancy. Dancing being to Valentine, in his new character of pre-Raffaelite enthusiast, a rather vulgar and decidedly unpoetic exercise, and Stella being tired, the two were sitting quietly in a corner playing at "spillikins"—not

a very intellectual game—where Stella was perpetually keeping Valentine from committing suicide by toying with the "trident" when too much involved, or for the "pipe" when certain to shake.

Since she had got over the first pain of Cyril's letter to Randolph—reading his silence as renunciation even of her memory—Stella had honestly and heroically done her best to live down her pain and to be in all things like other girls. So long as it had been a mutual heart-break between her and her lost Love she had carried her sorrow as her flag of fealty; but now when she believed herself if not absolutely forgotten—who can really forget?—yet resolutely set aside, she determined to bury that sorrow deep in her own breast, and even to do her best to make herself forget that she had other cause for active grief than that, sufficiently heavy in itself, of her dear mother's death. She knew that, for her own part, she should love Cyril all her life, and love him only. No other affection would ever take the place of this which she had worn as her glory and now bore as her cross. But she would not go about the world as a love-lorn damsel, wearing the willow and bidding for sympathy. She would be no Blighted Being whom the gentle would

pity and the cynical deride. And now that papa had thought it good for her to go again into society, she would go like any one else and force herself, at least to appear to take interest in all that went on—though she had no more real pleasure therein, and derived no more moral sustenance therefrom, than does the starving man when the typical stone is tossed into his lap for bread. Good-natured she had always been; ever ready to play chess with beginners or draughts with children; to rattle off waltzes or quadrilles for others to dance to; or to count her marriages in bésique and her points in piquet with the stupid and the old. But now she was even more good-natured and more helpful than before, if that were possible. Whenever any one was wanted to do a kind turn to others, or to do what was unpleasant to herself, Stella Branscombe came to the front and took up all the little social fardels in a row, shouldering them without a murmur. If a bore had to be got out of the way, Stella took him on her own hands and off the necks of the rest; if there were too many in a set, and some one had to give up, Stella was that some one; if an uncomfortable bit of duty had to be done in the parish, Stella was asked to do it, and she always did what she was asked. Young as she was,

she was getting to hold that impersonal kind of place which belongs to the "altruistic" nature, to be a kind of youthful social fairy godmother, to whom all came for help in moments of need, and from whom no one was turned away unsatisfied.

Still, she felt that beyond all this she had to find some more absorbing occupation than even social altruism gave her—something that should make her quite forget her own trouble in the activity of serious well-doing. Helping papa had failed to console her. She never quite understood why, but she knew that it had; and she did not feel as if being a kind of drawing-room fairy godmother was the exact ultimate of her aspirations or abilities. But all this was by the bye. What she had to do in the immediate present was to make herself generally useful and universally amiable; to thrust Cyril deep, deep into the recesses of her thoughts, as far in the background as was possible; and to forget herself all round. And she fulfilled her self-imposed task to the letter.

Over his spillikins, which served as a pretence, Valentine fixed his dark eyes on the sweet fair face before him bending over the table with all Stella Branscombe's sincerity of interest in the thing on hand. He looked at

her long and ardently, then suddenly, without preface or warning, he asked in a soft sentimental kind of way:

"Tell me, Miss Branscombe, what is your ideal of life?"

Stella who had never gone into abstruse questions of this kind, even under her father's frothy tuition, looked up with a puzzled face, and then said:

"What do you mean?"

"Your ideal of life," repeated Valentine, as if repetition were explanation, and a puzzle said twice over gave its own key in the echo.

"I do not know that I have any," she said in a pretty hesitating way, feeling dreadfully dense and silly. "I have never thought of it. I suppose we ought to do what good we can—to be as useful to others and as sincere to ourselves as is possible. I cannot give any other answer. What is your ideal? Then I shall know better what you mean by your question."

"Mine?" returned Valentine. "My ideal of life is Earnestness—the worship of the tender and the beautiful, the bringing of religiousness and spirituality into our daily doings like dear old George Herbert—striving after the better way through the culture of poetry by means of love and art."

An odd little movement of repulsion passed almost like a shudder over Stella.

"I do not think I care much for poetry," she said naïvely. "I think I like something more practical."

"Oh!" he said in aggrieved tone; "and you look the very soul of poetry in your own person! You not care for poetry, when you are made to be a man's muse, to inspire his loftiest thoughts, his noblest aspirations?"

"I sincerely hope not," said Stella with curious gravity. "I do not think that is my function at all."

"No. What then? Where does your great gift of influence lie?" he asked eagerly.

He had made a bad shot by his first guess, but, Supreme as she was, he must know in what censer he might burn his incense and by what liturgy intone his devotions.

"I am so matter-of-fact," she said, as if accusing herself of a fault. "I care so much more for realities than for all this kind of thing, as I just said. I would care to do good to the poor, to help the sorrowful, to nurse the sick—anything of that kind—so much more than to write poetry, or even inspire it."

"You might still be practical, yet inspire the poet, and with his loftiest themes!" answered

Valentine warmly. "The gracious Ladyes of the past—the sweet châtelaines who walked in their gardens and sat in their bowers—bore also the castle-keys at their girdles, and were servers of bread and leeches in their degree. The Ladye of La Garaye was the Lady Bountiful of whom you paint the outlines so delicately, so deliciously."

"But I do not think I should ever care to inspire a poet at all," persisted Stella. "A man ought to lead such a much freer and healthier and such a much more practical life than poets and artists do. To me, health and strength and energy are such grand things!"

"In man perhaps, not in woman," said Valentine in his sentimental craze for want of hæmatine and for relaxed fibre. "A woman should be a dainty, tender, delicate creature, all soul and spirit—a low-voiced, sweet-faced, fragile saint, to be taken care of by her husband to whom she should be at once his guardian angel and his charge. Her pure counsels should be his fount of inspiration and the guidance of his life, while his strength should give her service and protection."

Stella looked at her companion with frank surprise. She forgot even the "thirty" trident, at which she had been so delicately working,

and which was one of the great prizes of their odd little game.

"*You* say all this?" she said. "I thought you cared only for fun and gaiety, and that what you liked best in woman was good-humour and high spirits and all that kind of thing—girls who could walk and ride and row, and were never tired and never sad, and whose whole lives were just like so much dance-music."

"No, a thousand times no!" answered Valentine with strange energy. "Women of that kind are good to laugh with, I grant. They are first-rate fun and capital fellows all through; but the Supreme to idealize and idolize is of a very different type. My ideal would be a girl, pale, slender, gentle, fair, reminding one of a lily that had been a little bowed under the weight of a passing storm; of a blush-rose, surcharged with the tears of the morning; of a saintly martyr floating in the still lake, her hair spread out like an aureole about her; of all things tender and soft and plaintive, to whom I should minister—she demanding care because of her sublime weakness, and I, strong and reverent, proud to give her on my knees the service of my life. That is my ideal woman; and I would give her your form and features."

"Would you?" said Stella, with the most simple, the most sincere amazement. "How odd!"

Nothing being farther from her thoughts than loving, nothing was farther from her perceptions than being made love to. And if any one had told her that this was Valentine Cowley's method of making love she would have thought her informant was dreaming, or perhaps wilfully trying to deceive her.

At this moment, and before Valentine could answer, the music ceased in the drawing-room, and Randolph Mackenzie came lumbering through the doorway, bringing Gip on his arm. In their quality of hostesses she and Pip were looking after laggards and beating up partners for the next dance. Immediately behind these two came in Pip with Mil—more constant to the original type than his elder brother had shown himself to be. But then he was three years younger; he had not the steadying prospect of future inheritance and family headship to put a little moral ballast into him; and he had not yielded to the influences of Albert Jones and the love of blue china. He was still in the era of tomboys and fun. There were no flaws in the Pennefather pottery for him; he saw no beauty in saints destitute of hæmatine

and with fibres all relaxed; and poetry was simple bosh, when not an uglier word still. His brother's new vein of sentimentality surprised him as much as it surprised the Doves, but he supposed he would work out of it again. If he did not, he was a good fellow spoilt, said Mil; and he wondered how he could be such a duffer as to be taken in by one who himself was nothing but a duffer all round. However that was his own affair, and if he liked it, let him go the pace till he got tired! Just now he seemed to be going the pace at a hand-gallop, to judge by his face, which was the first thing they saw as the four came surging through the doorway, Randolph and Gip leading.

"I say, you pair of spoons!" shouted Gip; "what are you doing here, when you ought to be doing your duty by Augusta Latrobe, who has been playing for us like an angel? What's the use of you both if you don't dance when you should? Spooning-time never comes till after supper!"

"One cannot be always dancing, Gip!" said Valentine a shade testily. "And Miss Branscombe was tired."

"Then Miss Branscombe might be content to be tired for herself, without carrying off one of our partners to keep her company!" said

Gip with a grimace. "There's Hortensia Lyon been sitting out and little Lucy Grey and half a dozen other girls; and here are you carrying on over spillikins instead of doing your duty like a man! England expects every man to do his duty. Do you know that, Mr. Val! We don't allow laggards at Sherrardine!"

She laughed when she said this, just in her usual boisterous and extensive way; but her eyes were painfully bright and her laugh unmusically hard.

Valentine changed colour, and for a moment looked as if he were going to be angry. He seemed to think better of it however, and put on the most amiable face at his command.

"All right, Gip! I will do my duty next time like a man," he laughed; "and you shall be my Britannia!"

And at this they all laughed, as at an exquisite joke; all save Randolph Mackenzie, who looked like a man standing at the bar of the Old Bailey waiting for his sentence, and Stella, who wished that she was not so obtuse and could understand the fun which amused others so much. But the spell was broken for Valentine, the charm flown for the evening. He felt something like an enchanted prince who had been permitted to come out of that rough-

skinned husk in which he was enclosed, and appear as a lovely young man for a moment; but who must now go back to his mask and his hide, and be once more the mere kitchen scrub, if not the Beast of his daily appearance. He was no longer Valentine the poetic adorer of the ideal, but Val, the chosen chum of a noisy, wild and somewhat vulgar tomboy to whose "business" he had to play, keeping in the same line as hers and with the like method.

The two sitting at the little table got up, and all six went into the drawing-room where Stella undertook to play the next set of quadrilles, and Randolph said he would turn over the leaves of her music-book. Colonel Moneypenny had just been doing the like office for Mrs. Latrobe, though indeed she had scarcely needed his assistance, seeing that her waltz had occupied only one page and there were no leaves to turn. But as suddenly as Valentine Cowley's declaration of his ideal to Stella Branscombe—as much without preface or warning—the Colonel had abandoned his displeased attitude towards the fair-faced widow, and to-night had devoted himself to her as if no shadow of coolness had been between them. And, as taking no notice and letting things slide were the main points of Augusta's philosophy, she had

accepted his attentions with the most delightful and sweet-tempered forgiveness of past rudeness, and never seemed to remember that to-day had had a yesterday or might have a to-morrow.

Hortensia was sitting between her father and Mr. Branscombe, a meek and self-denying little Puritan, preferring quietness and lofty converse to all this loud and mindless gaiety. And even when a whist-table was formed, she went off with the elders, better pleased to watch a game of which she knew neither the rules nor the value of the cards, but where Mr. Branscombe was an authority, than to take part in the fun going on among the rest. With all these odd little kinks however, the rose-coloured thread of mirth and merriment ran on the whole smooth and straight; and only Randolph kept a saddened face, feeling as if his heart had leaden weights which dragged it down and made it heavy. Gip, who had got back her old playfellow, was as bright as it was her nature to be; and Pip, who had had no such twitch as had made her sister feel as if things had gone very crooked somehow within the last half-hour, was all that Pip ever was. Thus the evening passed in an apparent cloud of silver and gold floating over a sky all of blue and rose colour; and only

when all the guests had gone and the two Doves were safe in their own rooms with each other was the secret displayed.

"I say, Patrick," began her sister, as she brushed her fine hair with vigour; "what did you think of Val and Stella to-night? Is it a case? Looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I think he's awful nuts on her; I do indeed, George," said Pip gravely.

There was silence for a few moments.

"Those horrid quiet sly girls!" burst out Gip with strange passion. "They carry everything off and pretend they don't want to. Of all things in the world, I hate most a quiet flirt; and I am sure Stella Branscombe is a quiet flirt—I am sure of it from to-night."

"So I think, too, George; nasty mean thing," said Pip with energy. "Why cannot she be honest and above-board?—and why cannot she keep to her own spoons? We didn't interfere with Cyril when he was humbugging about; and we don't want that long lout of a Ran, who is as much in love with her as he can be. She might leave Val and Mil to us instead of coming in with her sly ways and spoiling all our fun. They'll be no good to any one if they get spoons on a girl; and that's what will be the end, if things go on like this!"

"It is too bad of her!" returned Gip. "Girls who poach on other girls' manors deserve to be shot!"

Which was a tolerably strong sentiment for rattling Georgie Pennefather, she whose good-humour was as proverbial as her fastness, and whose amiability and vulgarity were held to be in equal measure one with the other. But when the jade winces does it not show that she is galled?

CHAPTER XIII.

ON GUARD.

The new thread laid on the night of that little dance at Sherrardine was not suffered to lose itself in confused tangles, and knots which fastened nothing. It was very evident to Valentine Cowley that Stella's soul was not made in the way in which he held souls should go; and he set himself to the task of moulding that delicate particle according to his own ideas. It seemed to him also that it would be the most delightful thing in the world to have Stella Branscombe as his own private and particular friend—*his* soul's sister—whom he could love without fear and worship without stint, while being to her the spiritual Prometheus whom she in her turn would love and worship. Like all the world he knew that she and Cyril Ponsonby had been engaged; and, also like all the world, he could

see for himself how much she had suffered through the cancelling of that engagement—the reason being as patent as the fact. And this little drama, wherein the girl had played so sad and sweet a part, filled him with the most intense desire to make up for the loss of her lover by the gift of a spiritual brother—a handsome, strong and muscular young Prometheus who would make her soul and comfort her heart.

Acting then with this ever in view, Valentine soon made himself conspicuous by the exclusive devotion which he paid to Stella Branscombe when they met in public—which was often—and by the headlong manner in which he conducted his spiritual husbandry. He had ingratiated himself to a marvellous extent with Mr. Branscombe, who professed to find in him the Ideal Youth—Adonis in boating flannels and Antinous in cricket costume. Just such another as he himself had been at the same age, he used to say when discussing the young heir to the Cowley estates—handsome, well-born, strong and intellectual, all in one—an athlete, a poet and a modern English gentleman complete. Yes; Mr. Valentine Cowley was just such another as he himself had been and as he would have desired his son should have been,

had fortune been kind enough to present him with an heir. And feeling for the young fellow as he did, he encouraged him to come to Rose Hill as often as he wished; though, strangely enough when he did come he was for the most part relegated to the care of Stella unassisted, whose soul he might make without interruption while Mr. Branscombe devoted himself to Hortensia or his Muse, as things might chance. When it was to his Muse the poor grub had a bad time of it; for, with a mind fixed on that spiritual husbandman, who to him was nothing more nor less than a poacher, Randolph was not quite up to his usual mark of mechanical accuracy; and Prospero's elegant ferule was both sharp and heavy.

Highwood began to talk, as of course was to be expected; and to laugh in its witless sleeve at the weak-backed theory of maiden constancy and broken hearts. Stella Branscombe had made fuss enough about her disappointment, they said; meaning that her health had run down and that her face had grown pale and thin; but now they all wagered—some of them their heads and others sixpences—she would pick up again and be quite herself before another month was out! One nail would drive out another in the approved way tested by centuries,

they said with the cruel sneer of people who speak at random, applying general principles like quack blisters without stopping to inquire into symptoms or to search into causes.

This little sop of gossip came at a time of dearth in "ducks;" and the affair between Cyril's lost love and Gip's favourite chum began to be discussed as a foregone conclusion and evident arrangement, according to the way of people who are on low diet in the matter of their neighbour's doings. The only gossipers who scouted the idea of any grave meaning in all this attention were the Doves themselves; and they maintained that there was no more in it than there was in the man in the moon. Val thought no more of Stella Branscombe than he did of any other good-looking girl—only she was not so good-looking after all, and had gone off no end of late! She was fairly nice to talk to, and not such a stupid as to think every man "gone" who spoke to her; and of course Val liked to talk to her. But there was no more in it than this.

All this they said in public in the loudest and clearest voices and with the wildest cascades of laughter; but in private, between themselves, they struck another note and declined the useless trouble of trying to deceive each other.

During this time of her playfellow's secession Gip had enough to do to hold up her head, square her shoulders and make-believe not to mind, as a brave girl should. She had also enough to do to refrain from girding at Val for his inconstancy and twitting Stella for her slyness. But she did. She had a certain amount of maidenly pride for all her wildness, and carried her fox like a Spartan—Pip alone knowing what she hid beneath her cloak.

Randolph Mackenzie on his side was made miserable by this sentimental fancy of Val's. The guard which hitherto had been provisional became now a fact and an anxious charge. Had Stella been Cyril's portable and saleable property, given into his safe keeping till called for, and had Valentine Cowley been a burglar with skeleton keys and a dark lantern, Randolph could not have been more constant in his attendance; more vigilant in his character of preventive officer and private detective; more watchful against dangerous chances and advantages gained by boldness on the one side and granted by negligence on the other. Under the pressure of the moment the young fellow developed a keenness of perception, a craftiness of policy worthy of Machiavelli himself. He was ubiquitous and always ready; always armed

at all points and prepared for every emergency. Val Cowley was ubiquitous too; so that between the two Stella was well provided with cavaliers, and she at least had no reason to complain—as Georgie Pennefather said with two burning cheeks and flashing eyes, and a jerky little toss of her curly head. Manifestations of feeling which struck Stella as odd, to say the least of it, and such as she could not quite understand.

Neither could she understand how it was that she and her father were so almost entirely separated of late. From having kept her so close a prisoner in the studio, and so continually at work, in the first months after her dear mother's death, he had now not only ceased to desire her presence but was often even actively annoyed when she entered the Temple of the Muses—unless she brought Hortensia Lyon in her hand. He and his grub seemed to get on together in perfect harmony; and ever since Mr. Branscombe had written a little poem called "My Caliban," and Randolph had not seemed to see the personal application, Prospero had forgiven his mooncalf, having worked off his ill-humour against him according to the method of poets in general. And as, moreover, the little devotee supplied the necessary stimulus of flattery and applause, the mechanical perfection of Caliban

was all that he desired. Thus Stella was one too many in the Temple, save in her quality as the assigned cause for Hortensia's daily presence; and Mr. Branscombe was not sorry when Valentine Cowley came to the front as a possible future aspirant and present lightener of so much dead-weight of duty. The education of Hortensia Lyon's extremely interesting mind and sympathetic nature, was, according to him, the work given him by Divine Providence at this moment; and as a devout believer in Direction he devoted himself with zeal to the task assigned him.

Helped by her father, Valentine Cowley was ever with Stella. In riding he was on one side of her if Randolph was on the other. In skating she somehow found herself ever between these two, each as careful of her as if she had been a costly piece of Salviati glass insufficiently packed. In the evening Val danced twice with her for once with any one else; and when she sat out or played for the rest he generally found himself sitting out too, turning over the pages of the music-book at the wrong places, or discoursing in modern terms on the supreme beauty of quietness and the precious eloquence of silence. Yet go where he would and do what he would, the lumbering form of Randolph Mackenzie

ever obtruded itself like a huge iceberg between him and the sun, cooling his blood by the very force of propinquity, and making him more angry than he dared to confess or could wholly conceal. All the people talked, and even the more sensible among them assumed the truth of things whereof this was only the appearance; and the "duck" flew up to The Laurels and Mrs. Morshead, as all such ducks always did.

How that terrible old woman sitting like Bunyan's Pope and Pagan in her easy-chair and never stirring from her home, got to know everything that was going on in the place was a standing marvel to all. But it was a fact if a wonder; and far from being behind the rest The Laurels was a kind of well-head of local gossip; and old Mrs. Morshead was the nursing mother of all the little ducks which flew.

There was something in this report of Valentine Cowley's approaching if not completed engagement with Stella Branscombe that roused Mrs. Morshead's curiosity to its extremest point. She questioned Augusta closely and did her best to draw her; but she drew blank; as she always did on such matters. The fair-faced widow had none of that love of gossip and keenness in ill-natured criticism which are such strong characteristics in women, and she

preferred "not to know" rather than to help in laying the trail and setting on the hounds. She preferred too, the scolding which her ignorance was sure to bring down on her head to the consciousness that she had done an unoffending neighbour a bad turn and thrown another brand into a burning house.

"You are the most uninteresting girl I ever saw," said Mrs. Morshead pettishly, when Augusta, looking candid and ignorant, had effectually stopped her mother's curiosity and rendered her questions of no avail by answering: —"No; she knew nothing; had heard nothing; seen nothing; suspected nothing; and did not think there was anything for any one to know." —"You might be a hoodie-crow for all that you see and hear. You have no more sense than a blind puppy; I declare you have not!"

The mistress of The Laurels was a vulgar old creature for all her grand proprietorship and that stake in the county of which she was so proud. Like many ancient dames of good family in country places, she affected a certain breadth of provincialism and bygone fashions which passed for local patriotism and made her like a superior kind of peasant.

"I am very sorry, mamma," said Augusta quietly; "but you know of old that I never

gossip. I am the last to hear of anything that is going on, for I never ask and no one tells me."

"A burnt child dreads the fire," said Mrs. Morshead grimly. "Your very careful and very good-natured people have generally too much of the glass-house about them to please me. I don't wonder that you don't gossip, Augusta, as you call it. Perhaps in your place I should be as careful as you are. But then you see I have nothing to be afraid of; and people may throw stones at me as much as they like. I have no windows of my own that they can break," she added significantly.

"No, you have not," assented Augusta with matter-of-fact serenity.

Mrs. Morshead twitched her shawl; her sure sign of annoyance.

"I wish to my heart I could say so much for my daughter," she said with a curious kind of snap. "If you had followed in the footsteps of your mother, Augusta, things would have been very different from what they are."

The widow made no answer. What indeed, could she say? Had she objected, defended herself, pushed her mother to explain her meaning and then demanded proof of what she would have said, there would have been a quarrel and one of those wordy tempests which

it was the great aim of Augusta's home-life to avoid. It was so far easier to slip under the harrow than to try and force those cruel teeth to take another direction, or to go back on their line and cover up its traces! Wherefore she kept silence now, as always, when her mother flung about the wild-fire of these unjust accusations; and at this moment, as her own ill-luck would have it, Stella Branscombe came into the room. Her visits had become somewhat less rare of late, since her father had given her more liberty and had taken off the interdict laid on Augusta. They were by no means frequent even now; partly because Stella was afraid of Mrs. Morshead, and partly because she did not care to appear as if she took a greedy advantage of her comparative freedom; still, they were not quite so few and far between as they had been during the late summer and autumn.

"You here alone?" said Mrs. Morshead as her greeting, lifting up her heavy old grizzled eyebrows as Stella entered.

"Yes," said Stella; "papa was busy."

"And you come without your shadow?" the old woman said, repeating her movement of surprise.

Stella smiled in a pretty, perplexed, uncertain

way, and looked from the mother to the daughter.

"Who is my shadow, Mrs. Morshead?" she asked, still smiling.

"Oh, I forgot; you have two—or perhaps I should say two and a half," answered Mrs. Morshead. "That young mountebank Valentine Cowley; that great lout Randolph Mackenzie; and that affected little piece of goods, Hortensia Lyon. She is your half—the other half of her belongs, by all accounts, to your father."

Mrs. Morshead said this in her grimmest way, and looked at Stella to see how she took the blow.

"At least I am richer than poor Peter Schlemil," said Stella good-temperedly. "He had none, and you say that I have three!"

"Two too many, young lady," said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "Young ladies should not let themselves get talked about."

"Am I talked about?" asked Stella, in her turn lifting up her eyebrows—her surprise a little more genuine than Mrs. Morshead's had been.

"You need scarcely ask such a simple question as that!" said the old woman, even more sharply than before. "A young lady

who is never seen without two young men tacked to her skirts is sure to be talked about! What else can she expect? Do you think people are blind or dumb?"

"They may save themselves the trouble of talking about me!" said Stella with a flash of indignation. "People must indeed be badly off for subjects of conversation, to choose me!"

"I suppose you do as well as any one else?" retorted Mrs. Morshead. "Do you think you are sacred—not to be touched or looked at—tabooed, like a South Sea Island idol? Neither you nor any one else; and so I tell you! From the Queen on her throne to the kitchen-maid in the scullery, every woman gets talked about, more or less; only some who are imprudent a great deal more than less. And that will be your fate, Miss Stella Branscombe, if you don't look sharp and are not more careful than you are!"

"Oh, Mrs. Morshead!" cried Stella.

"Well—'oh, Mrs. Morshead,' and what then?" said the mistress of The Laurels with gruff irony. "Saying, 'oh, Mrs. Morshead,' and getting as red as a peony won't help matters when a friend is kind enough to tell you the truth. A motherless girl as you are, you should be grateful to any one who will take

the trouble of trying to put you in the right way, and not set yourself against them when they are doing what they can to be of use to you."

"I did not mean to set myself against you," said Stella quietly; but the terrible old woman was in an atrociously bad temper to-day and not to be mollified by any process known to humanity.

"Whether you meant it or not, you did it," she said crossly. "And I speak only for your good and because I respected your poor dear mother who is dead and gone, and who would have been the first to have objected to such goings on. And I am a mother myself," she added, as if giving a piece of news that clinched the argument.

"I am sure I am very much obliged to you for your good intention," was Stella's meek reply; and then Augusta cutting in with: "Where are you going, Stella? shall Tony and I come with you?" the conversation turned off at a sharp angle by Mrs. Morshead refusing to allow her daughter to go out at all—such a cold day as it was—enough to freeze that poor, dear little child to the very marrow! But Augusta never thought of her boy, poor fellow! If she wanted to do anything that would give herself

pleasure, that poor, dear, little delicate creature might be scorched to a cinder or frozen to death for anything she cared. She was as strong as a horse herself, and did not seem able to understand that a young child needed care and attention. It was a ridiculous day for any one to be out in; and if Stella Branscombe took her advice she would go straight home at once, and make herself comfortable by her own warm fireside. What did she want with prancing about like this in a frost and cold enough to kill a cart-horse? Such folly! She, Mrs. Morshead, hated all this gadding about. Why could not people stay quietly at home? It was the best place for them. But well! there! she was an old-fashioned woman, born and brought up in a time when women were women and home was home, and the world had not gone mad after pleasure and gadding as it had now.

"I have promised to meet papa at Derwent Lodge. We are all going to the Broads," said Stella, as if apologizing for not obeying the terrible old woman on the spot.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Morshead dryly. "I thought you said your dear papa was too busy to call here with you to-day?"

"Yes, when I came out he was," answered

the girl innocently. "But he said he would be ready in half an hour and then I was to meet him. I do wish Augusta would come too!" she added, returning to the charge with a pretty coaxing kind of persistence that would have won any heart but Mrs. Morshead's. "It is really a beautiful day when you are out, Mrs. Morshead, and not nearly so cold as it is in the house. There is no wind, and the sun is really quite warm!"

"Oh, of course!—of course it is!" Mrs. Morshead answered. "A frosty day in January, with the hills all covered with snow and the thermometer below zero, is quite mild and genial. We all know that when young ladies want to shut the house-door behind them. You can go if you like, Augusta, of course. You are not in prison in your mother's house; and you can take that poor dear child with you, if you like. You are his mother, and must do as you think best. But if he has croup or inflammation of the lungs to-night, do not blame me and do not ask me to sit up with him—that is all!"

"I think I will take the chance for the sake of the good the run will do him," said the widow cheerfully; and Mrs. Morshead, on this, gave an angry kind of grunt, and twitched her

shawl with so much energy that she tore the border and somehow made it out to be Augusta's fault.

But as everything was somehow Augusta's fault, when the lines of life at The Laurels ran crosswise, one sin, more or less, did not much signify in the sum total of the year. And after her daughter had expressed her sorrow at this misfortune, had offered to mend the rent to-night and been severely scolded for her meddlesome disposition, the two young women went upstairs to Augusta's room, while she dressed herself and the child for their walk and kept laudable and unfeminine silence on the skeleton of the house below.

The only sign given by the young widow of having endured anything unpleasant was a quick little sigh as she shut the door of her bedroom, and a sudden turn to Stella, whom she kissed.

"How good of you to come for me to-day, darling!" she said with a smile which seemed less to express pleasure than to mask pain. "I was just longing for some fresh air when you came in; but my mother is in one of her most uncomfortable states to-day, and I do not think I should have got leave to go out had you not called and carried me off."

"I am so glad I came," said Stella.

And neither said anything more. They were getting to that pass of intimacy when they understood without the need of explanation.

CHAPTER XIV.

PLAIN TRUTHS.

"And yet, Stella dearie, mamma is right—people *are* talking about you and Valentine Cowley."

Augusta said this when they had got well out of the grounds of The Laurels. She spoke abruptly, suddenly interrupting the silence that had fallen between the two since they left the house.

"Oh, Augusta, how can you be so cruel?" said Stella, startled as if out of a sleep.

What Mrs. Morshead might choose to say was only a pin-prick of no more value than the mere momentary irritation; what Augusta said was of a very different character and had to be taken as serious and important.

"No, I am not cruel; I am only telling you what you ought to know," returned Augusta.

"To mamma, of course, I admitted nothing; but there can be no concealment between you and me. So I tell you the truth; and this is the truth—people *are* talking."

"But what are they saying?" cried Stella, her face on fire yet with something of terror in it too. But in general, terror blanches, not flushes.

"That you are engaged to be married to Valentine Cowley," returned Augusta as tranquilly as she would have said: "Your hat is not straight," or "a hair-pin is coming out."

"What dreadful nonsense! He has never said a word to me! He cares no more for me than he does for Hortensia Lyon, and not half so much as for Georgie Pennefather."

Stella said this with an indignant rush, as if her mere assertion were proof sufficient for all rational persons.

"As for that I think you are mistaken," said the widow quietly. "From what I have seen I am quite sure that Valentine Cowley is only biding his time and seeing what his chances are likely to be before he makes you an offer. Every one thinks this who does not think you already engaged," she added, looking at her companion.

"Augusta!"

Stella could say no more. This information came upon her with something more than surprise—with a feeling of sacrilege to Cyril's memory, of disloyalty to the past that was almost unendurable. She felt fallen from her place of pride in her purity, and guilty of some nameless sin. She must have been to blame to make it possible for people to say such dreadful things. She must have done something wrong. And yet she had been innocent in her guilt. She had not known when or where she had sinned.

"He seems to be a very nice fellow," said Augusta, after she had given her poor friend a little time to recover herself.

She was being horridly cruel; that she knew and confessed; but love is sometimes cruel to be kind in the end, and when an operation had to be performed the most humane surgeon is he who does it with most determination. It was for Stella's good; and she must bear the smart for the sake of the future healing.

"He seems to be immensely improved this year; don't you think so?" continued Augusta.

"I have not thought much about him in any way," answered Stella with a little film of sulkiness in her manner, the result of choking back her natural inclination to cry.

Had she obeyed that natural inclination she would have sat down on the frozen snow by the road-side, and would there have given way to those tears which help women so wonderfully in their sorrow. Not being able to do this she battled with her weakness and overcame it so far as to answer rationally enough, but with just a shade of temper as her protest.

"I think he has—immensely," continued Augusta, seeing and not heeding. "I think him one of the handsomest young men I have ever seen."

"Do you?" said Stella with indifference, seeing that she was expected to say something.

"Don't you?" returned Augusta.

"I have not thought about it," repeated the girl.

"You dear little bat, you must be blind! He is splendid!" said Augusta enthusiastically. "And he will be very rich when his father dies. He is the eldest, is he not?"

"Yes; he is the eldest," said Stella.

"And his people are very wealthy, are they not?"

"I believe so; but I know nothing more than you do, Augusta!" with a decided accent of impatience. "How should I possibly know more of the Cowleys than any one else does?

If you want to learn all about them why do you not ask the Pennefathers instead of me?"

The widow glanced sideways at the girl. Was craft or boldness the best game to play with her?—careful stalking or a sweeping drive? There were so few points in her character of what Augusta would have called reasonableness, and perhaps what others might have said was worldliness, by which she could be moved to her own advantage—she allowed herself to be so completely dominated by that troublesome and inconvenient conscience backed up by her affections and her romantic ideas about constancy and the like—that it seemed almost hopeless to try and influence her to her own good. Yet—if she could be swayed; what a grand thing it would be for her!

"I wish, Stella, my darling, that you ——"

The widow stopped. Should she spoil all by a premature direction?

"That I, what?" asked Stella without curiosity.

"That you could like Valentine Cowley and marry him!" said Augusta with the feeling that now she had done it!

"Augusta!"

Stella turned away with a gesture of frank abhorrence.

"Now you are not to be angry with me. I love you dearly, and I want only your happiness," said Augusta. "It would be the best thing that you could do—by far the best—to marry Valentine Cowley. If you give him the least encouragement he will ask you, and oh! Stella, dear child, accept him when he does! Take my advice—I am older and more experienced than you; you will save yourself infinite sorrow if you do as I tell you!"

"Do not say that, Augusta, please do not!" said Stella, with a kind of agony on her face. "It sounds like blasphemy to me to tell me that I am to marry any one!"

"But if Cyril has really acquiesced in your decision?—it was yours, remember, dear. He did not wish it! And men are not to be played fast and loose with at our will. If we do give them up, you know, we must expect them to take us at our words; and there is no good in looking back. To give up the substance and live on the shadow is not very wise!" she added with a hard laugh, while her cheeks with their two bright burning spots made the double application as plainly as words would have done.

"He may; and has," said Stella, her lips quivering as she spoke; "but though he may

give me up in his memory, I cannot forget him! I shall never love again! never! never!" she repeated.

"Well, you know best, of course, but don't let people say you are breaking your heart for a man who has forgotten you! Wearing the willow all your life is not a very dignified kind of life, my dear. And by far the wisest thing would be to make your happiness in another direction now that the original venture has failed."

"How can you say such things, Augusta! I sometimes feel as if you were two people!" cried Stella, almost angrily. "So charming and sympathetic and sweet in some things; so hard and worldly in others!"

"So reasonable you mean, dear," the widow answered gaily; and yet her gaiety had a terribly artificial sound in it! "So opposed to all silly sentimentality, and so heartily despising weakness in all its forms. That is what you call being hard and worldly. I don't. However, good-bye for the present. Here we are at that little snake's house; for she is a snake, Stella, and so you will find out some day! I will not be seen and I must go home now. We have had our run, Tony and I, and mamma is so uncomfortable to-day, I had better go

back. Good-bye, darling. Think over what I have said, and look me in the face before I go and say you are not angry with me."

For an instant Stella kept her eyes to the ground; then she raised them frankly and gave both her hands affectionately.

"No, I am not angry, dear!" she said, her own sweet tender smile about her lips while her eyes were still grave and thoughtful. "You mean well by me, I know—only we do not agree as to what is well."

"Time will show!" laughed the widow, as she turned away with her boy, a little relieved that all had ended as smoothly as it had done. She had plunged into deep waters, but she had not damaged herself nor shipwrecked the friendship which made a great part of her private happiness. And her escape from the danger to which she had voluntarily exposed herself in Stella's affections counted to her as a gain from which she would make a further step yet in advance.

Stella found them all waiting for her at Derwent Lodge—her father in his fine furred coat and general look of gloss and get-up; Hortensia in her quaintly-severe dress, always with the flavour of Evangeline about her; Mr. and Mrs. Lyon, the one good-tempered, unæs-

thetic, rubicund, the other with that odd mixture of depression and irritation proper to wives who are sat upon by their husbands; and Randolph, with his good, brave, honest, unintellectual face—the dear, big, human watch-dog that he was! And as soon as the girl appeared the whole cavalcade set out—Hortensia between her father and her elderly idol, Stella between Mrs. Lyon and Cyril's chum.

Surely something was in the air to-day! What was it? Valentine Cowley had never pressed himself on Stella with so much evident intention of absorbing her; Georgie Penne-father, who had the trick of turning up where least expected and least desired, and who could hold on like a leech without showing that she was sticking voluntarily to her post, had never been more ubiquitous nor more tenacious; and Randolph had never shown himself more resolute in guarding Cyril's property from all chance of theft by interlopers or from the bolder robbery of burglars. It was like a game of blind-man's buff where every one was being caught against his or her will.

For one little moment on the ice Valentine got Stella to himself. Gip's skate had come unfastened, and though she had called to her

old playfellow to help her, she was obliged to be content with the aid that Randolph was compelled to give in Val's wilful deafness and rapid absence.

"Do you like that great lumbering fellow, that Mackenzie?" asked handsome Val with irrepressible ill-humour.

At the moment jealousy was beyond brotherly love; and he could not employ the moment better than by slinging his stone against the watch-dog.

"Very much indeed," said Stella, trying to stop her rapid transit; adding: "Let us wait for them."

Valentine, who had her hand, took no notice of her last words. He bit his lip with vexation; bit it vigorously, as a scorpion might have stung itself; and then said sharply, disagreeably, with a sneering smile:

"And he, I suppose, is fond of you in return?"

"I hope so," said Stella with grave dignity.

"What kind of tie can there be between you, the very soul of grace and sweetness, and that great awkward fellow—that lout who has only his inches to recommend him!" said Valentine with disdain. "I should as soon have expected you to have made your favourite friend of

Chang himself as of Randolph Mackenzie! These overgrown fellows have neither brains nor muscles! They are mere carrots when put to it!"

Stella changed colour. She could not tell the truth and say that she liked Randolph because she had loved—had loved?—Cyril; and Randolph had a flavour of Cyril, and brought with him the remembrance, the association of her lost love. She could not confess this; and she dared not take up the cudgels too warmly in her friend's behalf because of this in her heart. But she did say with extreme pride:

"I like him because he is honest, truthful, unselfish—because I can trust him."

"You could not say less of a dog," laughed Valentine unpleasantly. "It is the clod and the goddess over again."

"But he is not a clod, and I am not a goddess," said Stella; "and do stop, Mr. Cowley! Let us wait for them."

"No, do not ask me that," he said, his manner suddenly changing. "I have so seldom the chance of seeing you alone—you are always so closely pursued by that fellow. I can never get a moment with you without witnesses and listeners!"

"Why should we not have witnesses and

listeners?" repeated Stella hastily. "There are no secrets between us!"

"There may be some day," said Valentine with meaning; and Stella, enlightened by Augusta, answered with half-frightened promptitude:

"That is impossible, Mr. Cowley. I never make secrets with any one!"

And as at that instant the pursuers came up with them, heated and out of breath, Valentine could make no reply and could only look as if he had none to make.

"How awfully fast you went, you two!" cried Gip. "You looked like running away—I declare you did! I began to wonder whether Gretna Green was at the end of the Broads, didn't I, Ran?" she said, turning to Randolph and laughing till the echoes rang again.

"What kept you two back, Gip?" asked Val. "Were you spooning? I believe you were; and want to turn the tables upon innocent me!"

"No, I don't think Ran or I are gone on each other," said Gip with another laugh. "It was only my bothering skate that came loose. The horrid old strap broke. I called no end to you, but you were as deaf as a post and went on like a couple of lamplighters! I tell you,

it looked just like a case of Gretna Green; and I heard a lot of people notice it."

"Georgie! how can you say such dreadful things?" cried Stella indignantly.

"Why are they dreadful?" retorted Georgie. "Do you want to be like an ostrich, Stella, and to stick your head in a bag believing that no one sees you because you can't see yourself? Of course it looked like spoons, your flying off from us in that mad way!—and you would have been the first to say so yourself if you had seen it in any one else. But I'm sure you are quite welcome. I don't want to spoil sport. So come along, Ran, and let us leave these two to themselves. We don't want to pick gooseberries, do we?"

"Do not talk such nonsense, Georgie!" cried Stella, even more indignantly than before.

Turning to Randolph she held out her hand, making him her skating-partner and balancing-pole as if to cut short all this undesirable folly. It was not often that she looked haughty and superb; but she did at this moment—her head held high, her face flushed, her eyes dark and bright, and a new spirit altogether animating and informing her. Valentine looked at her with admiration which made his face like a book or a mirror.

"By Jove!" he said, drawing his breath as a man does when he is startled. If he had thought Stella Branscombe supreme in her sweetness he thought her still more so in her pride.

"You needn't look like that, Stella, as if you would bite my nose off!" said Gip with another peal of laughter. "I declare you and Val seem as if you were acting a charade together."

Her voice and words seemed to waken her old play-fellow from a dream. Evidently he pulled himself together, as he would have expressed it; and turning from Stella, looked at Gip at first with surprise, then with curiosity, and then as if asking something or seeking something. Suddenly he burst into a queer kind of laugh as he took her hand in his and said:

"Now, don't be savage, Gip, and satire is not your style. Come for a spin with me, and perhaps you will have got into a good temper by the end. Why, you little fury, I didn't know you had so much malice in you!" he said, as they skated off and left the causa belli standing with her watch-dog.

To which Gip answered candidly:

"Well, Val, of all things I hate a sneak about the worst. And that little Stella Branscombe is a real sneak, out and out!"

So what with Hortensia a snake, and Stella a sneak, the girlhood of Highwood had not much to congratulate itself on in the way of honesty.

Randolph, his face flushed and his eyes full of dumb reproach, stood all this time, grounded on his heels, awkwardly holding Stella's hand in his. He had none of that kind of courage which makes a man take advantage of a chance. As Gip said of him to Pip in those confidential hours when the Doves dissected their neighbours: "He could not spell opportunity to save his life." And she said the truth. Certainly, with Stella Branscombe, who was surrounded with the sanctity belonging to Cyril's property and who was his own Star—because Cyril's—he was always that step in the rear which needs direction and in a sense permission before it goes on.

"Let us go back to where papa and the Lyons are standing," said Stella; and Randolph obediently answered: "Very well, let us;" as he would have answered had she proposed anything else.

And on this they set off at a much tamer step than she had been forced to take with Valentine. As they went, Randolph, whose heart was too full to be contained in silence, broke his way out with all the frank and

tactless honesty which was so specially his own.

"I was so sorry, Miss Stella, when you went off like that with young Cowley!" he said.

"I could not help it," returned Stella rather stonily.

"Georgie made such a row! The whole Broads must have heard her. I wanted you so much to turn back," said Randolph.

"What a silly girl that Georgie is!" cried Stella. "I am sure I do not want Mr. Cowley ever to speak to me again. Why does she let him? If she is so jealous of him, I wish she would keep him to herself."

"I wish he did not pay you quite so much attention," hazarded Randolph. "People are speaking of it so much; and I am sure you do not wish that, Miss Stella."

"Speaking of what? What do they say?" cried Stella, up in arms as she had been more than once to-day.

"Well, just what people do who have nothing else to say, and no brains to say it with," replied Randolph in a rather mixed way. "They say that he is in love with you—and of course it is easy to see that he is—and that you are engaged to him; which you are not. I tell every one you are not," he added with energy.

"What a shame! what a horrid shame!" cried Stella, tears rushing into her eyes. "How I wish I could get away from Highwood!" she added with a girl's natural petulance. "It is too horrid to be made the subject of gossip and falsehood like this."

"But you are not angry with me because I have told you?" said Randolph anxiously. "It is only my duty to give you a word of warning, when I think you want it. And indeed, dear Miss Stella, you must be careful with Valentine Cowley, if you do not want people to think more than is true. I am sure you don't mind my saying this. Tell me that you don't."

"No," said Stella, making an heroic effort over herself; "I am much obliged to you. I know that you have done it for my good."

All the same she felt horribly humiliated and ill-treated by fate, fortune and humanity in general, and wished that she could run away from home to-morrow and hide herself in some inaccessible place where neither Val Cowley nor Highwood gossip could find her.

"I am going off the ice now," she said more coldly in spite of herself than usual, as she and Randolph neared the bank where her father was waiting with the Lyons.

"So soon!" he said ruefully.

"Yes, I have had quite enough of it," was her reply; and poor Randolph, feeling in disgrace, said no more.

"You have not been long, Stella," said Hortensia who wished she had stayed away longer.

"My dear, have you had enough already?" asked her father, who shared Hortensia's wish.

"Yes," said Stella, feeling herself unwelcome, being sensitive enough to feel "the sound of a shadow" at this moment.

She turned to Mrs. Lyon and put her hand within her arm. Here at least she was not one too many; and a mother was always something precious and comforting to her.

"You and young Mr. Cowley made quite a feature on the broad expanse," said Mr. Branscombe with a courtly air. "I was proud of the elegance and swiftness with which you went. It was really quite suggestive!"

"I am glad you were pleased with me, papa!" said Stella, her face brightening as she spoke. Praise from her dear papa, a little too rare in these days, was so delightful! so consoling!

"Yes, quite well pleased," returned her father. "You made really a striking couple—quite

what I call a show couple!" he added with an odd expression about his mouth.

Soon after this Valentine and Gip, having finished the "spin" by which the former had bargained for the return to good-temper of the latter, came up to the little group on the bank.

"Mr. Valentine Cowley," said Mr. Branscombe in a loud artificial voice; "allow me to congratulate you on your elegance and prowess. You remind me of my own young days, and, egad, sir! once I was the crack skater of the regiment. I have never seen one who has come near me but yourself."

"Very glad, Mr. Branscombe, I am sure," said Val, pleased at the old fellow's butter—as Gip called it in private a few minutes after—because it was Stella's father who gave it.

"I shall be glad if you will come back with me and dine at Rose Hill, this evening," continued Mr. Branscombe. "I have one or two little trifles to show you that I think with your taste you will appreciate."

"Delighted, I am sure!" said Val, radiant, while Stella blushed scarlet, Randolph looked as if he had received his sentence of death, and Gip, scarcely waiting to be out of hearing, cried out to her old playfellow: "The most

audacious bid I ever heard in my life. You will be green, Val, if you are taken in by that old fop!"

"Never fear, Gip," said Val with a laugh. "I know what I am about!"

CHAPTER XV.

"OTHER EYES."

SUDDENLY Highwood blazed with news of Cyril Ponsonby. Every one was talking of him; every one had his or her comments to make, his or her deductions to draw; every one had either foreseen such a chance as this from the first and was not in the least degree surprised when it came, knowing the young man's character so well!—or else, had never been so profoundly shocked, would never have suspected that Cyril Ponsonby, such a nice fellow as he was, could have been guilty of such a thing, and would not have believed it save on such good authority as that of Jack Pennefather's. For Jack, whose tea-plantation was quite close to Cyril's station, had written home to his people what the family called an awfully jolly yarn; and among other bits of news had informed them that Cyril was

quite "gone" on a pretty little woman, a Mrs. White, the wife of Captain White, of the Ninety-ninth; that he fairly lived in their bungalow; and that this little woman, who was called "Lalla Rookh" by the fellows, was never seen without Cyril lashed to her skirts. The old man was in awfully good form, continued Jack, and as lively as a cricket; always in the front of the fun and the life of the place all round. He was a dead shot at big game, and made bags that made one's mouth water; but even brave men said he was too reckless, and that some day he would come to grief no end. But though he was a good fellow enough, he was not quite on the square to carry on as he did with Lalla; for the Captain had stuck up for him, and been his friend from the first, and it did not seem quite the thing to spoon his wife in return. However, that was their own affair, said Jack, with the commendable philosophy of letting people order their own households as they would; and no one had the right to interfere if the Captain didn't object.

The lad forgot to add, or rather he himself did not stop to reflect, that perhaps there was not a word of truth in the whole of this notable report; and that if analyzed and reduced to its original basis it would probably be found of no

more weight than a pinch of dust—the gossip of a small Indian station not being worth the breath consumed in repeating it. Jack said nothing of this, and no one said it for him; so the letter made a profound sensation at Highwood and on none more than the Pennefathers.

It was one thing for girls to like fun and noise, and to call their playfellows "old men," "dear boys," and by their Christian names when not by some yet more familiar nickname; and another thing for young married women to get talked about with young unmarried men! The one was legitimate; and not only legitimate but laudable as a protest against Sticks—Sticks being anything but laudable! But prancing after a young married woman—spooning another man's wife—ugh! that was ugly, and wicked, and shameful; and both Gip and Pip, wild little pusses as they were, got red with genuine indignation when they spoke of it. This creature, this Mrs. White, ought to be cut for a little wretch who wanted more than her share; and Cyril Ponsonby deserved a thrashing to bring him to a sense of good manners. As he was the one known to the Highwood community, while Mrs. White was only a name, he got the severer half of the punishment. Had it been

the other way—or had Mrs. White been known too—she would have come in for more than her "thirds," while the man would have been perhaps pitied as the victim of her wiles.

The place echoed so loudly with indignation at this report of Cyril's misdeeds, that, of course, it came to Stella's ears. There are never wanting good-natured people to tell you of what will wound you to hear; and the society at Highwood was no exception to the rule. If no one else had enlightened her, Gip and Pip would have been sure to have carried both matches and candle. As it was, she heard the news from every one as it seemed to her, at once; though the shock was softened by Augusta making herself the first medium of communication, and telling her what she knew would be so much anguish to hear, with some regard to humanity in the method. For though Stella did not agree with Augusta in her views of life and common-sense conduct—did not follow her advice and thought that advice all wrong—still they were true and loving friends and held closely together. The widow had too much reasonableness, Stella too much sweetness, and both too much mutual affection, to quarrel with each other for a difference of opinion. As neither could prove herself right, each therefore must be allowed to

think as she would; and fights in the air are stupid things to wage.

"I knew that you will hear it from others, so I thought I would be the first to tell you. You would bear it better from me because you know how much I love and feel for you," said Augusta kindly.

She had come up to Rose Hill on a cold, damp, drizzling day—one of those days of chilling thaw which rots the ice and turns the snow to muddy slush, but which bring no sense of warmth or release—simply to warn her friend of the trial that was before her.

Stella held by her flag of fealty to the one whom she had loved.

"I do not believe it," she said simply; her disclaimer so essentially a confession of love as well as of faith.

"It may be exaggerated—I dare say it is; but there must be some groundwork," said Augusta. "There is no smoke without fire, dear Stella."

"He is not that kind of man; I know him better than this," said Stella, sticking to her point. "He cannot have changed in such a short time; and I know what his principles were."

"Still, a man's character comes out only

under trial," urged the widow. "It makes all the difference whether he is happy or unhappy, tried or not tried. Many of us who do perfectly well if things go right with us fall utterly to pieces—go headlong to ruin when they go wrong. And Cyril Ponsonby may be of that kind, you know, dear. We cannot tell yet."

"Then in that case it is I who have ruined him body and soul," said Stella, covering her face.

Augusta looked at her for a moment in silence. Another woman would have said: "Did I not advise you to marry him? And if you had taken my advice would not all this have been spared both to you and to him?" But Augusta was not like other women in things of this kind, and at all times cared more for the establishment of a principle than for self-glory or justification. After a little time of silence, she said, gently:

"There is no good in going back on our actions. You did what you thought best at the time. Let the rest go. If the story is true as it stands it only shows that Cyril was essentially weak, and you have had an escape."

Stella did not answer, but she thought within herself, as a woman naturally would think: "No, it only shows that he loved me, and that I have ruined him!"

"But now, darling," said Augusta; "be brave to the world. Let no one see that you suffer, and do not defend him too warmly. Just listen in silence, without saying anything one way or the other. Be inscrutable. Do not give the faintest indication of what you feel. That is the best armour for a woman to wear—a smooth surface, but as impenetrable as it is smooth."

"I do not think I can bear to hear him slandered without defending him," said Stella with quivering lips.

"Then all the world will say that you are in love with him, Stella," said Augusta, the lightest little accent of scorn lying in her voice.

"They may, if they like," said Stella.

"And you do not object to the appearance of caring for a man who has ceased to care for you? Whether you broke off the engagement or not, at all events he has shown that he has forgotten you and has consoled himself with some one else."

"I defend him as a friend; and he has not consoled himself," said Stella, with more fidelity than logic.

The widow went over to where she was sitting, and laid her hands on her shoulders.

"Stella, dear child, I cannot bear that you

should make this frightful mistake!" she cried, speaking so earnestly that the blood came into her face like fire and her grey eyes glistened and grew dark. "I know the world so much better than you do, and I know too, what idle and ill-natured people are capable of saying. I cannot have you jeered at by all the foolish and slanderous tongues in Highwood. You must not; you must not, indeed!"

"Must not what, Augusta?" asked Stella, laying her hands in turn on her friend's arms.

"Defend Cyril Ponsonby," said Augusta.

"I cannot hear him slandered and not defend him," answered Stella gravely. "That would be too base, and cowardly!"

"That conscience again!" half sighed the widow. "It is a troublesome possession to you, my dear."

"I would rather have the trouble of it than be without it," said Stella; and Augusta said no more.

They were on such different planes of principles, she thought there was no use in trying to bring things together. They must be content to mutually love and respect each other for what was worthy to be loved and respected in each; and they must let the rest go. Discretion ranked with Augusta as

the greatest social virtue; duty was to Stella the epitome of the whole world of morals. There was no middle term between the two; and each must work out her own redemption her own way. But though Augusta had not done all that she had hoped to do in thus making herself the bearer of ill-tidings, she had done something. She had put Stella on her guard against a sudden shock from others; and had thus saved from unnecessary pain and damaging self-betrayal the girl with whom she said to herself twenty times a day she was really too angry to care what became of her, and for whom she felt that irrepressible respect which the conscientious and truthful perforce inspire.

"Well! you must act as you think best, of course, dear," Augusta said, throwing up the game. "We are different; and must be content to remain so. Nothing would humiliate me so much as to be thought in love with a man who no longer cared for me."

"And I would rather people said that of me than that I should seem to believe a slander and join in disparagement of a friend—whom I respect," said Stella.

On this the widow kissed her and talked of something else. But when they parted at the

house door—Stella going into the hall with her friend to help her to fasten her waterproof, and to see that she was as well protected from the weather as was possible—standing face to face for the last words, Stella threw her arms round the widow and said with a sudden outburst of feeling which swept away every vestige of misunderstanding:

"You are the kindest, dearest, wisest woman in the world!"

To which Augusta answered:

"And you have the best heart, my darling; but we will not speak about the dear head!—God bless it!"

By which it may be seen that they parted on more than ordinarily amicable terms, and that the difference in their moral standpoints made no difference in their mutual affection.

That evening there was to be a charade-party at the Lyons', and, of course, both the Branscombes and the Pennefathers were there. It was just one of the ordinary evening-parties so frequent at this time, when every one in the place was invited and no one dreamed of refusing; and apparently there was no point of difference between this or any other. And yet there was a difference; and every one felt as if society had put on a new dress and the

diamond had received another facet; as if the curtain had risen on a new act and at least one of the actresses had to appear in an untried character.

How would she look? how would she bear herself? Poor thing! said some, it would be a trial for her; but others sniffed at the word, and said: "Trial! How should it be a trial to her when she was carrying on a flirtation on her own side, and probably was at this moment engaged to that young Mr. Cowley? Did a girl want all the world at her feet, and that one man should be sighing his heart out for her in India while another was making love to her in England? Trial! what trial could there be for her in hearing that Cyril Ponsonby was making a fool of himself and worse, out there? She had thrown him over; so she had nothing to say!"

Nevertheless, they were all on the very tiptoe of expectation, and each wondered who would launch the first thunderbolt and who cast the first stone.

They were standing grouped about the room, as people do in evening-parties before they have settled down to the work of the hour. Stella and Augusta were side by side, and talking to them were Valentine Cowley and

Colonel Moneypenny. The twins were at the farther end of the room, arranging with their brothers, Milford Cowley and one or two more, about the charades. For though it was the Lyons' party and the Lyons' house the Pennefathers were the moving spirits, as they always were in matters of fun and gaiety. Presently Val and Augusta were wanted for the green-room.

"I'll go for them," said Gip, her bright eyes looking a little dangerous and her manner somewhat that of a Bedouin, a Bashi-Bazouk, or what one will of aggressive and determined, with the victim within sight and the plan of attack prepared.

Going across the room she broke into the little circle.

"Augusta, dear, we want you," she said very prettily—for noisy Georgie Pennefather quite sweetly indeed; "and you, Val, we want you too, if you can possibly tear yourselves away from Stella Branscombe's skirts. Will you give him leave to come and act with us, Stella?" she added with a loud laugh.

It was so little in her way to be ill-natured that even now, when she had stung herself into this sharp hostility to her old chum's latest realization of the Supreme in Woman, she was

obliged to retain her old manner—though it was only manner; the informing spirit and impulse being something quite different.

"What are you going to trot out, Gip?" asked Val, a certain look of insolence in his studied nonchalance.

"Oh! I can't give the word, you know," said Gip with another laugh. "That would be telling. You have to sing a song, though—Lover's 'What would you do, love?' Oh, by the bye, Stella," she added, turning suddenly to the girl, and speaking in a loud, clear, ringing voice, which all the room could hear; "talking of 'other eyes,' have you heard of your old flame, Cyril Ponsonby, how he is spooning a young married woman—and the wife too of the man who has been kindest of all to him at the station? Isn't it a shame? Don't you think it horrid?"

The curtain had drawn up and the new act of the drama had begun. There was a dead silence among the guests. Mr. Branscombe, who had heard nothing of Cyril's misdemeanour before this moment, was startled, and looked at his daughter quite naturally, not having had time to take up an attitude or to put himself into any kind of moral pose. He was anxious to see how Stella would bear herself, but he did

not feel able to give her any note of direction. She must get out of the scrape in the best way she could, and only when it was all over would he come in with his final flourish. Randolph Mackenzie, near Hortensia, turned all manner of colours, his whole being thrilled with pain for Stella and with indignation against Georgie Pennefather; and Hortensia's prim little face became rigid and rather red, as befitted a tender-souled and virtuous Evangeline before whom naughty subjects were discussed. For the rest, they merely held their breath and listened; while Dr. Quigley, appearing to be absorbed in a book of photographs, kept his eyes fixed on Stella, looking up sideways from under his bushy brows.

"It would be very dreadful indeed if it were true," said Stella in a low but perfectly distinct voice, standing there with her head slightly bent and her eyes fixed and steady, a little too self-composed and nerved for perfect simplicity of parry. She was evidently prepared for the attack and was not taken by surprise.

"Oh! it is true enough! Jack knows all about it," said Gip. "And hasn't he made good use of his time, just? He has not worn the willow for those he left behind him, whatever other people may have done! But after

all, wearing the willow is out of fashion now, isn't it, Stella?"

Again a wild, forced, rude kind of laugh gave extra point and meaning to her words; and again the room heard and understood and watched in silence for more to come.

"Is it?" said Stella quietly. "I suppose constancy—for that is what you mean by wearing the willow, is it not?—is as much the fashion now as it ever was with some, and as little so with others."

"Those 'some' don't lodge here," said Gip.

"Do they not?" said Stella, with an admirable appearance of sublime indifference.

"I don't think *you* need ask," said Georgie Pennefather sharply, glancing at Valentine, her bold black eyes showering down on him an infinitude of fiery reproach.

"No?" said Stella. "The whole question does not belong to me in any way. I have nothing to do with it."

Georgie was baffled. She had been cut by that impenetrable smoothness which causes all the arrows to glance off into space and turns the point of all the spears; and even she, reckless as she was, dared not cast conventional politeness so entirely to the winds as to attack at too close quarters the girl of whom she was jealous.

"At all events," she said, going back to the point which she knew to be vulnerable, though she could not see the wound; "at all events, Cyril Ponsonby has shown what he is made of. He cannot lay claim to constancy, or even to common honour. A man spooning a young married woman. Horrible! Disgraceful! At least I think so if you don't, Stella!"

"I should think so too if I believed it to be true," said Stella. "But I do not believe it," she repeated, this time even more firmly than before.

Augusta touched her foot in warning; Mr. Branscombe twisted his moustache in a nervous and irritated manner; Colonel Moneypenny bent over to Augusta Latrobe and whispered:

"What a noble creature! How few would do as she has dared to do!"

But in saying this he thought of himself and the fair widow's advocacy of him and belief in him, should he be attacked in her presence and slandered in his own absence. He did not think of Sandro Kemp, say; nor would he have called it noble in her had she defended that obnoxious designer of walls and ceilings had he been vilified, however unjustly. Valentine Cowley bit his lip as his manner was when annoyed; and very heartily in his own mind

consigned Cyril Ponsonby and Georgie Pennefather to the infernal deities together. Dr. Quigley, still watching and looking, made up his mind as to the meaning of the whole affair; and Randolph had a curiously mixed feeling of admiration, sympathy, sorrow—and something quite undefinable to himself—something that made him rejoice at Val Cowley's discomfiture and yet sorry and disappointed somehow; but why he did not know and could not for the life of him understand. Meanwhile Stella stood there quite quietly, alone in her advocacy and yet quite sufficiently supported by her love and her courage.

Then Dr. Quigley came up to her and said in a slow, measured way:

"You are quite right, Miss Stella, not to believe ill words of an old friend. I don't believe a word of it all! There is some mistake somewhere; or it is merely the ordinary gossip of a small station where people have nothing better to do than pick holes in each other's coats and make nothing into something. Cyril Ponsonby was not the fellow to make love to another man's wife."

"No, he is not," said Randolph from the other side of the room. "The story is either a mistake or an exaggeration. I am sure of that!"

Her two supporters nearly broke down Stella's guard. She had borne both loneliness and opposition in her advocacy, but when it came to help and the rallying of shield-bearers she was nearly overcome. Still she had to control herself for pride's sake; and she did manage to keep her face set as before. And then others, who had been taken by surprise in the beginning and who had held their breath in expectation of the drama to come, began to talk among themselves, as people will, no matter what is afloat, after the first few moments of silent excitement. The sharpness of the interest was blunted by the inevitable egoism of human nature, and the whole thing passed off into the noise and movement of an ordinary evening-party.

But when they were arranging their charades, Val said to Gip, in a kind of aside:

"I did not think you had it in you, Gip! If any one had told me I would have denied it on your behalf!"

"What?" asked Gip, with the most innocent manner in the world.

"Such abominable cruelty! I hate to see such cruelty from one girl to another! It was really too mean of you to take such an advantage. I could not understand you, Gip. I do not understand you!"

Valentine spoke hurriedly, with scarcely suppressed excitement and evident annoyance of a graver kind than the occasion seemed to warrant, seeing that he was originally Gip's friend and only a later adherent of Stella's.

"You will take her part, of course," said Gip, with an odd mixture of defiance and discomfort.

Valentine turned his eyes right into hers.

"Any one would take her part," he answered.

"Oh, if you are as much gone as that, I have no more to say!" said Gip, with flashing eyes and a little quiver about her lips. "I didn't know that you had come spoons as far as that."

"Nonsense, Gip! And you know it is nonsense! It has nothing to do with being gone or coming spoons," said Valentine angrily. "It was simply a case of ordinary feeling—ordinary womanly delicacy of compassion. It was an unprovoked attack from first to last, and I can only say I am sorry for it. I would not have believed such a thing of you unless I had heard it with my own ears."

And on this he turned away, while Gip's quick-beating heart said: "Did I do wrong?" the faintest echo of a "Yes," whispered by her conscience, breaking through the louder "No" of her jealousy and wrath. That yes would have had to be spoken in a far more distinct

voice before she would have been brought to the grace of penitence and the nobility of confession. Crying "peccavi" and "mea culpa" was not much in Georgie Pennefather's experience. Up to now she had never been so deeply stirred as to be led to do a serious wrong. Her peccadilloes hitherto had been of a very insignificant and superficial kind; and it was easy to say: "I'm awfully sorry!" for a mistake which had not been intended and which had not been very damaging when made. When it came to the acknowledgment of evil thoughts, and repentance for a cruel action, that was another matter altogether. The smoke of the battle must clear away before you can bury your dead; and passions must be subdued before you can feel that you have wronged another while under their influence, and so come into the clearer light of consciousness of sin and avowal of your fault.

There was however just so much sense of wrong-doing in Gip as to make her say that night, when she and Pip, in blue slippers and crimson-flannel dressing-gowns, were talking over the events of the evening:

"Was I a brute to Stella, Patrick? I was wild against her!—but was I a brute?"

"Well, you were a little rough on her, I

must say," said Pip, with the air of one who is sorry to condemn, but who cannot help herself.

"If I was, she is a sneak and deserved it," said Gip, tearing at her embroidery with vigour.

Then she burst into a curious fit of crying, alternating with a wild and harsh kind of laughter which frightened Pattie, and made her think that her twin Dove had gone mad. But this unwonted hysterical attack soon passed; and after they had both agreed that Stella was a sneak as Gip had said, and that Val was an awful idiot to be taken in by her, and that it was downright horrid in a girl to pretend to be constant to one man when she was doing everything she could to get hold of another, they felt a great deal easier in their minds. All the same, Pattie repeated, sorrowfully:

"But you were awfully rough on her, George, and I was sorry; for it is such awfully bad form, you know, to be nasty like that before such a lot of people!"

To which Georgie answered with an evanescent glance of repentance on her flushed little face:

"I'm awfully sorry if I gave it her too hot; she deserved it; but I did not want to be a brute."

"But you were," said Pattie with grave regret.

"If I was, Val slated me hard enough. So we may cry quits over that!" said Gip, her gleam of repentance passing into space and her naughty passions once more triumphant.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

The only effect which Georgie Pennefather's ill-timed attack had on Valentine Cowley was to make him still more tenderly devoted to Stella, and doubly anxious to take that place of spiritual brother which conceals so much more than it confesses and gives so much more than it asks. So far the poor Dove had taken nothing, and had lost a great deal, by her imprudent outburst; but after that first "slating," as the vulgar little creature called it, Valentine said no more, and cut the ground of complaint from under the feet of his former playfellow by his almost rude rollick, his rough gaiety when they were together. It was rollick that was forced and gaiety that was assumed; and Gip, who was by no means remarkable for either sensitiveness or perspicuity, saw through the

veil and resented the attempt to blind her. She was scarcely like herself in these later days; and from the most easy-going, joyous, unconcerned kind of modern slang-loving Thalia, developed into a very fury, always more or less in a bad humour and alternating between shrill impertinence and gloomy sulks. She made even her own family feel the sudden change that had been wrought in her—a change for which Valentine Cowley alone was responsible, and the effect of which should by rights have been confined to him. But she was too sore, poor little creature, to be wise or just; and the fox which she had carried so bravely in the beginning had by now leaped out and shown his cruel muzzle to more than one onlooker.

As far as Stella herself was concerned, she would have been rejoiced to have given back her chum to curly-headed Gip, and to have freed herself from the shaping hand of her would-be Prometheus. Yet how could she? Mr. Branscombe's admiration for this Ideal Youth—himself restored to adolescence—was so openly expressed and so strongly marked, his invitations were so frequent and so warmly given, and his occupations so unfortunately peremptory when the young fellow did come to Rose Hill, that Stella was thrown more and

more in Valentine's way and with less than ever of outside interference. All Highwood said that it was a case, and Miss Stella was doing better than might have been expected for a young lady who had been publicly engaged and as publicly cast aside; but some more astute shook their heads and said: "No; that was not it. It was the father not the daughter—a case of settlements not of inconstancy."

The one who suffered most of all—even more than Stella—was poor Randolph. He was miserable and almost without knowing why. He could scarcely flatter himself that he was Cyril's lieutenant, holding the ground sacred because his friend had planted there his flag. After all that had been said by Jack Pennefather—with that axiom about fire and smoke echoing in his ears—and after the unsatisfactory and reckless letters which he himself had received, he could not pretend to believe that the thing had any life in it now, or that the future had any hope. Nevertheless, he gloomed and watched, and wondered about that would-be Prometheus and his version of Psyche, with a ferocious kind of care which more than once brought him into trouble. It made Valentine furious and Stella embarrassed, and brought down on his intrusive pate Mr. Branscombe's elegant ferule

with a force that made even the poor grub smart. But nothing in the way of castigation had any lasting effect on him. He was still the jostling and ubiquitous watch-dog to the office of which he had devoted himself; and if at times he embarrassed Stella, at times he helped and protected her. And one success wiped off the score of twenty failures. When he saw the dear troubled eyes brighten as he came into the room, where she sat alone with Valentine, listening to love so thinly disguised as to be recognized even by her—anxious as she was not to hear and not to see—he felt then that he had established his claim and given a reason for his existence. If she had really wanted Val Cowley's attentions, he would have been broken-hearted and he would have retired. He should have lost his faith in her, and by her in womankind in general, but he would not have stood in her way. As things were, with the troubled eyes becoming bright when he entered and interrupted, he was satisfied with himself and full of determination to go on as he had begun.

One day indeed, he went so far as to leave his "work" for the sake of cutting short a tête-à-tête which he knew was taking place in the drawing-room. And when he went in, making a foolish and very transparent pretext of

wanting something that did not exist, Stella was so evidently relieved, so frankly glad and grateful for his coming, that the poor fellow turned redder than usual with delight; and if Miss Stella at that moment had asked him to die for her he would have performed Hari-Kari as a short cut to Paradise.

Valentine almost gnashed his teeth with anger at the intrusion. He had been working up to his point with admirable skill and artistry, and it was annoying to have all his clever approaches trodden down and scattered under the huge foot of this stupid son of Anak! Little Randolph cared for the black looks and flaming eyes of the baffled besieger! He had helped and relieved the dear, half-frightened besieged, and that was his reward. But his fingers were well rapped by his employer, who soon came to look for him and carry him back to his grind, and who made the rest of the morning uncomfortable enough.

All the same, those artistic approaches were destroyed for the present; and Stella was able to prevent their immediate reconstruction.

She made it evident to Val in her own quiet way, that anything definite would be premature and a dead failure. His only chance lay in his spiritual fraternity; in his keeping his disguise

so close that she should cease to fear the possibility of a new revelation; in accustoming her to him as a pleasant and innocuous fact in her life. When habit had welded this fact thoroughly into the substance of her days, and had made it part of her thoughts and one with her doings, then he might come out of his husk, throw aside his disguise, and carry his point by the very force of habit. A woman will give to a man who has made himself a necessary friend, what she would have denied to the lover; and Valentine knew this as a theory which he designed to test by practice. This then, was his scheme; and on paper and in potentialities it stood fair and firm.

The visit of the Cowley boys to Highwood was drawing to a close, but Stella's soul was still incomplete and her fidelity to Cyril unshaken. Val would scarcely flatter himself that he had done much, but he knew that he had done something; and the rest would come in time. Meanwhile, in the frankest and most gentlemanlike way possible, he asked Mr. Branscombe's consent to a correspondence which was to do Stella some unknown and undesignated "good;" and in the frankest and most gentlemanlike way possible Mr. Branscombe gave that consent and hoped that his

dear child would profit by the chance. So far the young fellow cleverly enough kept the place open and the future in hand.

And then the brothers went off to spend the second half of the vacation at their own home; and Val's letters were so frequent and so long, so full of questions to be answered and of subjects to be discussed, they took up almost as much of Stella's time as Cyril's had done. Stella took care to make them household property, and to let Val know that she threw them over to her father even before reading them herself. She would have cut the whole thing short had she done as she would; but Mr. Branscombe insisted on the correspondence for the sake of that mysterious "good" which was to accrue to her mind and nature. As there was really nothing which ought to either frighten or revolt her, she was forced to let matters take their course, and to submit to a correspondence which seemed to her in some sort a desecration of the past if of no evil in the present.

Not having much to do of any kind, and nothing that was absorbing, Colonel Moneypenny gave a great deal of time and attention to his neighbours; and this little drama of Stella Branscombe's, with the unanswered

questions: "Would she be faithful to Cyril's memory?"—or, "Would she console herself with Valentine Cowley?" interested him almost as much as if it had been his own private and personal affair. He professed himself charmed with Stella Branscombe, though he did not say which way he wished her to take; and he envied the young fellows their chances which ever way she went. She was a delightful girl and worth any man's money; and so he said to Augusta, with a little sparkle of malice in his deep-set eyes, watching to see how she would take praises of such unstinted warmth for one who had evidently the trick of winning men's love. When a girl, in a country-place where young men are precious by their rarity, could boast of one lover, one aspirant and one watch-dog, she may be marked dangerous and a fit subject for other girls' jealousy. But so was Augusta dangerous, in just the same way and to exactly the same degree. If Stella had three marked off to her share, the widow had found the same number, including himself in Valentine Cowley's place; with the poor dead husband to balance the exiled lover; and Sandro Kemp keeping even step with Randolph Mackenzie. Yet not quite even.—Sandro was a burnt-out sky-rocket, and Randolph was a

watch-dog in situ. But the burnt-out sky-rocket was the more dangerous of the two!

"She really is a most charming girl," the Colonel said, the malicious light of exaggeration flashing over his sincerity; "and she will some day make some man supremely happy. I know no one better able to make a man thoroughly happy than Miss Stella Branscombe."

"She has no business to make any man happy, unless it is Cyril Ponsonby; and that will never be!" said Mrs. Morshead tartly. "She was as good as married—engaged in the face of the world as she was and with all her wedding-things ordered! If the young hussy marries, I say she will be just as bad as if she were a widow; and I hope she has too much good feeling and too much modesty to do such a thing. I think too well of her, Colonel Moneypenny, to suppose it possible; though they have talked of this young Cowley, and of that long Randolph Mackenzie too! I don't believe a word of either—not a word. And so I have always said. Have I not, Augusta?"

"Have you, mamma?" asked the widow sweetly, in the voice that meant assent.

"Have I? Why of course I have!" snapped Mrs. Morshead sharply.

Colonel Moneypenny twisted his moustache

with his long nervous fingers, and flushed, as he always did when annoyed.

"I think you are a little severe, Mrs. Morshead," he said in an irritable voice.

"No; I am not severe at all," the terrible old woman answered. "If I, and such as I, did not keep people straight, where would society go to I should like to know? Severe! I am a great deal too lenient; that is what it is—not the other way."

"Do you share your mother's views?" asked the Colonel, turning to Augusta rather abruptly.

The widow looked sweet, mindless, tranquil; and yet her cheeks had that pretty pink glow which marked a state of internal excitement well covered down and concealed.

"It is a difficult question," she said quietly.

"Difficult! Where is the difficulty, I should like to know!" said Mrs. Morshead. "It is as plain as a turnpike road! Where is the difficulty, Augusta?"

"In the children," answered her daughter.

"Not in the woman?" asked the Colonel quickly.

"More in the children," she replied. "A good stepmother or a good stepfather is so difficult to find!"

She looked into the Colonel's face as she said

this, her calm and candid eyes as expressionless, as free from consciousness as if they had been a doll's.

"And I say it is in the woman," said Mrs. Morshead. "A second marriage is not a bit better than heathen vice and polygamy!"

"Oh, Mrs. Morshead!" remonstrated the Colonel.

"Well, Colonel Moneypenny, I think I ought to know when I have been a widow myself these twelve years and more!" said Mrs. Morshead in a thin voice; and Colonel Moneypenny, not to be beaten, answered back:

"I don't see how that affects the question, Mrs. Morshead. I have been a widower these twenty-two years, and I don't see the sin of marrying again."

"It would be more to your credit, perhaps, if you did," snapped the old woman; and her voice and eyes and manner again sent the blood into the Colonel's face—and kept it there.

A day or two after this little brush with his generally concordant gossip, Colonel Moneypenny called again at The Laurels on some frivolous pretence about the next meeting of the book-lending society, with which neither Mrs. Morshead nor Augusta had anything whatever to do. He brought a showy toy for Tony

—it was not an expensive one, extravagance being dead against the Colonel's principles; and he gave it with a curious parade of consciousness in well-doing and bashfulness combined. It was the first time in his life that he had done such a thing; and when he handed the toy waggon to Augusta he felt as awkward and embarrassed as a girl when she receives her first offer and does not love the man. Then he graciously inquired of the fair widow if she would like her little fellow to ride his pony? His groom should hold him on, and every care should be taken of him. If she wanted him to have a good seat she could not begin too early with him; and he would be very glad to see that he was taught well. Hitherto he had thought of the boy only as a hindrance and a nuisance; now he gave him the place of a medium and association. He was so very pressing in his offers of service, so very paternal and thoughtful, that he showed his hand too plainly and let Mrs. Morshead into the secret of his play.

"Is that old fool making up to you, Augusta?" she said sharply, when he left. "What a tiresome girl you are, to be sure!" she added. "It is all your fault; and I am sure I do not know how you do it. First one and then

another—I have no peace in my life with you!"

"Well, mamma, I do not see what I do that should annoy you," said Augusta with tranquil unconcern.

"You do everything," replied Mrs. Morshead. "I think all you young women in Highwood have taken leave of the few senses Providence ever gave you to go on with. There is Stella Branscombe and Cyril Ponsonby; Stella Branscombe and that young Cowley; Stella Branscombe and that long Randolph Mackenzie; and you and all the men you can get hold of. It is horrible. Nothing but flirting and marrying, or wanting to get married! It is downright indecent; I declare it is!"

"It is the old, old story, mamma," said Augusta imprudently.

"The old, old rubbish! That's what it is!" growled her mother savagely. "Let me catch you at it, Augusta, that's all! I'll soon teach you what the old, old story means! Have you lost *all* your dignity, *all* your modesty, I want to know? You are nothing better than a mere light-o'-love, that is what you are! Flirting here and flirting there, and you a widow, who should be in weeds and with a decent cap on your head, instead of with nothing at all and

your hair like a girl. You are shameful; and no more fit to be the mother of that dear, little fatherless boy than if you were sixteen. I am sick and tired of it all; I declare I am; and I almost wish that you would marry so that I might be at peace for the rest of my days!"

"Do you, mamma?" said Augusta, rising with that same sudden excitement almost fierceness of face which her mother had seen in her before, if so rarely, and once to such disastrous results. It was the face which betokened such a strong stirring of the usually quiet waters, that it both angered and frightened the old woman.

"Don't look like that at me!" she said harshly. "I won't be looked at like that, Augusta, as if you were going to strike me! Leave the room, Miss, until you can behave yourself as you ought; and be thankful that I do not say leave the house for a bad, wicked, undutiful girl that you are—and as ungrateful as you are high! Go and marry!" she continued, her passion increasing with expression. "Don't think that I want to keep you at home. You are nothing but a nuisance from first to last—a trouble and a plague, both you and your boy. Go and marry that old prig, or Mr. Branscombe, or Sandy Kemp the sign-painter"

—how she sneered and showed her fang-like eye-teeth when she said this—"anybody you like! I wash my hands of you, and shall be glad to get rid of you. And so I say it!"

Augusta did not answer. Whatever was in her heart of anger and humiliation she stifled, as she had so often stifled it before. But this time she controlled only the expression; the feeling raged if her lips were still, and she felt as if she could not bear all this misery and contumely and live.

Without another word she turned and left the room; and in a few moments Mrs. Morshead heard her leave the house and saw her walk hurriedly down the drive—alone. For one of the few occasions since she had returned to the cold shelter of this ungenial home, she left her little son to the care of the maids while she went off on her own business without him.

"I have a great mind to say that she shall never come back again, that she may pack up and go—she and her troublesome little brat. She is a wicked and undutiful young hussy, and as sly as she is disobedient. She has been nothing but a torment to me ever since she was born. She may go; and joy go with her!" said Mrs. Morshead aloud.

But her heart was heavy, and she tried in

vain to stiffen her resolution by artificial aid—to keep her anger hot by crackling thorns. In vain too, she sought for comfort in her cat. The Shah purred lazily when she caressed him, but went to sleep on her lap, understanding nothing of all that terror of consequences, that unacknowledged regret for what she had said, and that one hot tear which fell from her eyes. It was all to give and nothing to receive in this worship of her four-footed favourite; and at this moment what she wanted was the support of sympathy in her wrong-doing, and the assurance that she had acted with dignity, spirit and maternal propriety all round.

Walking, she scarcely knew where nor for what purpose—not conscious of the cold north wind that blew with such bitter force, nor of the heavy clouds which were massing sullenly overhead—not conscious of anything but the pain by which she was stung as by a living serpent—Augusta went on with a rapid step; her head on fire and her heart one great throb of passionate despair. What should she do? She could not, would not, must not, bear it! Her son's future fortune was precious and her care; but were not some things even more precious than that fortune? To live as he and she were living now, under perpetual insult,

scoff, rebuke, suspicion—in perpetual subjection —was not this paying too dearly for his patrimony? At this moment she thought so; and she thought too, with a woman's madness—that madness of dèspair and rash resolve which was so seldom hers—that she would give herself to the first man who might ask her; to Sandro Kemp, were he here, for love and without fortune; to Colonel Moneypenny, for fortune and without love;—to any one indeed, rather than remain the sport and victim of her mother's tongue and temper. Any one! any one! yes, even to the Colonel!

"Well met!" said a voice with an indescribable ring of satisfaction in its tones.

She started as if from a dream and found herself immediately in front of the Colonel's place, Bellevue;—with the owner himself on the point of entering in at the lodge gate.

"Well met!" he said again, taking her hand. "You are just in time to shelter. The snowstorm has begun."

END OF VOL. II.

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